

Colombia's U'wa Face New Threats

U'wa Indigenous Group Confront New Threats to their Lives and Territory



The U'wa Campaign

Colombia's U'wa indigenous people have fought against oil development on their land for over 15 years. The threat continues today in the form of Ecopetrol, Colombia's national oil company. Underwritten by the U.S. Export Import Bank, Ecopetrol intends to expand onto indigenous territory against reiterated U'wa opposition.

Known as "the people who speak", the U'wa are a peaceful Indigenous community of roughly 6,200 people who live in the cloud forest of northeastern Colombia, straddling the border with Venezuela. The U'wa traditional

belief that oil is the blood of Mother Earth has supported a consistent and strong opposition to any oil operations within their ancestral territory.

In the 1990's, U'wa leaders partnered with Colombian and international allies to oppose oil development plans to be carried out by Los Angeles based Occidental Petroleum (OXY). The campaign received extensive media coverage including a story on the front page of the Wall Street Journal. Activists also targeted OXY's top shareholders including Fidelity Investments. After suffering 75 protests at its offices nationwide, Fidelity moved to sell \$400 million in OXY

shares. In 2002, OXY announced that it was pulling out of the oil project.

Ecopetrol and the Current Threat

Following OXY's departure, rights to the Sirirí and Catleya oil concessions, overlapping U'wa territory, were transferred in full to Ecopetrol. The U'wa are concerned about Ecopetrol's increased rate of exploratory drilling around the Gibraltar platforms – located on the northern boundary of the recognized U'wa Unified Reserve – against the steadfast opposition of U'wa communities in this region. Since 2007, there has been an influx of heavy machinery, equipment, and oil workers into the area. With the discovery of gas, a processing plant is under construction at Gibraltar, in addition to a gas pipeline running westward toward Bucaramanga.

Ecopetrol has in the past expressed its intention to carry out exploration and drilling within the legally recognized U'wa Unified Reserve. Maps taken from Ecopetrol's community presentations illustrate the company's plans for seismic testing in the heart of the U'wa territory. This expansion is of great concern and violates prior commitments to the U'wa people.

Ecopetrol argues that the Gibraltar wells are found outside of U'wa territory as legally recognized by the



Taken from Ecopetrol's website, this map illustrates the northern border of the U'wa reserve. Within the red oval it shows the "Area of Future Drilling", illustrating Ecopetrol's intention of drilling within the boundaries of the reserve.

Colombian state, and therefore operations there do not require prior consultation with indigenous authorities. In fact, the Gibraltar wells fall within U'wa traditional ancestral lands, which the U'wa consider to be their territory. The Gibraltar drill site contains several sacred cultural sites and was purchased by the U'wa Association in the late 1990's as part of their program to recuperate their ancestral territory. It was later forcibly expropriated. Also, given the close proximity of the Gibraltar wells to the U'wa community, oil operations there have direct social and environmental impacts on the communities. These can include health impacts from pollution, social conflict between outside workers and local indigenous peoples, and most notably oil installations attract violence and armed conflict.

U'wa Territory in the Crosshairs

In addition to Ecopetrol's gas project and likely expansion of oil and gas exploration in and around the U'wa reserve, there are a number of other

threats to the U'wa's exercise of control within their own territory.

- **Coal mining:** Friends of the Earth Colombia is monitoring several new mining concessions within U'wa territory, made without any consultation with the U'wa leadership. Coal is an increasingly important part of the Colombian economy – last year, coal earned the Colombia government over \$1 billion in mining taxes and royalties. In 2009, roughly 80% of U.S. coal imports came from Colombia

- **Bi-national road:** There have been discussions about building a road to connect Colombia with Venezuela, cutting right through the heart of the U'wa reserve. Such a road would have obvious military and economic uses, while posing a serious threat to U'wa culture and environment. The negative social and environmental impacts of large roads on local communities are well documented, while the promised benefits rarely materialize.

- **El Cocuy National Park:** Natural protected areas, administered by state entities, often conflict with the rights of local indigenous communities, imposing conservation rules on them that limit their subsistence activities. A significant area of the U'wa Reserve is overlapped by the Cocuy National Park. The Government has proposed an expansion of eco-tourist activities into an area containing lakes sacred to the U'wa.

- **Militarization:** U'wa have a long history of opposition to any armed

presence in their territory, based on inherently nonviolent cultural values. Part of their resistance to resource extraction is their understanding of the Colombian pattern in which rural economic bonanzas inexorably attract armed groups. Recent years have seen significant movements of illegal armed groups through U'wa territory and the militarization carried out by Colombia's armed forces.

Join the U'wa Campaign

The U'wa, who view themselves as the defenders of the earth, continue to nonviolently fight for their rights through different means. After years of conflicts, protests, violence and victories, the long-threatened extraction of hydrocarbon and other natural resources could be around the corner. The ability of the U'wa to thwart this threat will depend on their own courage and conviction, and the support they receive from allies like you and me.

Please sign up for updates, donate, and take action at www.amazonwatch.org.

About the U'wa Defense Project at Amazon Watch: Amazon Watch has been a key ally of the U'wa since the international campaign started in the mid 1990's. The U'wa Defense Project was founded in 1999, following the tragic killing of three U.S. indigenous rights activists during a visit to U'wa territory. In 2006 the UDP was merged with Amazon Watch and today continues as one of the organization's flagship campaigns.

Amazon Watch works to protect the rainforest and advance the rights of indigenous peoples in the Amazon Basin

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