
Peru: The silent genocide of the last uncontacted indigenous groups

The Peruvian government is not only responsible for the open repression of Amazonian peoples which it is currently carrying out, but also for the silent genocide of the last uncontacted indigenous groups still living in isolation within their ancestral territories.

As documented in a recent Survival International report, one such case is happening with indigenous peoples living along the Envira River in the Peruvian Province of Ucayali. Illegal loggers have been invading territory belonging to uncontacted Indians in the south-east of Peru, forcing them to flee across the border into nearby Brazil, where they are likely to come into conflict with other, similarly isolated, Indians already living in Brazil.

The loggers are mainly seeking mahogany and cedar. Peru boasts some of the last commercially-viable mahogany trees anywhere in the world. According to José Carlos Meirelles, head of the Brazilian Indian Affairs Department's post in the area, mahogany exploration in the headwaters of the Jurua, Purus and Envira (rivers in Peru), have caused the forced migration of indigenous groups in Peru.

Despite the abundant evidence about the presence of these isolated indigenous groups, Peru's government has failed to publicly accept that uncontacted Indians are fleeing from Peru to Brazil. Peru's president, Alan Garcia, has even suggested the tribes do not exist.

Another case is that of the Napo-Tigre Indians in the Province of Loreto. Multinational oil companies are working inside the territories of at least two uncontacted tribes living between the Napo and Tigre rivers in northern Peru.

One of them, Perenco (an Anglo-French company), recently revealed its intention to send hundreds of workers into the region. According to the company, one oil well has already been drilled.

The area where Perenco is working is in the middle of a proposed reserve for the Indians. Perenco's presence in the region is opposed by indigenous organisations in Peru which have filed lawsuits against the company.

The identities of the uncontacted tribes living in the area are not clear, but one is believed to be a subgroup of the Waorani, and another is known as the 'Pananujuri'. Perenco denies the tribes exist.

Perenco's chairman, Francois Perrodo, recently met Peru's president, Alan Garcia. Days later, a law was passed declaring Perenco's work in the region a "national necessity".

Other companies involved in the Napo-Tigre area are Repsol-YPF, ConocoPhillips, the Colombian state oil company Ecopetrol, and the Brazilian state oil company Petrobras.

It is important to stress that uncontacted tribes face two principal threats to their survival. By far the greatest is their lack of immunity to common Western diseases such as influenza, chicken pox,

measles, and a host of respiratory diseases. Even where 'first contact' between an isolated tribe and outsiders is carefully managed, it is common for significant numbers of tribespeople to die in the months following contact.

Where such encounters are not managed, with medical plans in place, the entire tribe, or a large proportion of it, can be wiped out. Such catastrophes have occurred repeatedly in the Amazon, and not just in the distant past: in 1996, for example, at least half the Murunahua Indians died after they were contacted by illegal mahogany loggers. The other key threat is simply violence: in several of the cases outlined in this report the tribes people face gangs of heavily-armed loggers who are likely to shoot them on sight.

By refusing to acknowledge the existence of these groups and by allowing and even promoting the entry of loggers and oil companies into their territories, the Peruvian government is guilty of genocide.

Article based on information from Survival International's Report "One Year On. Uncontacted tribes face extinction", May 29, 2009

http://assets.survival-international.org/documents/14/One_Year_On_Survival_Report.pdf