Colombia: The U'wa demand Ecopetrol to retreat immediately from their sacred territory

There seems to be no truce for the U'wa people in their long resistance in defence of their ancestral rights to life and to their land and in rejection of the oil exploitation projects on their traditional territory (see WRM Bulletins 10, 22, 29 and 38). The Colombia Plan, Ecopetrol and its associated oil companies, the neglectful government, are all threats to the U'wa territory, who believe that it is "the heart of the world. The veins feeding the universe run through this territory. If it is destroyed, the world will bleed to death."

Faced by the continuation of seismic exploration by Ecopetrol, the U'wa people have issued the following communiqué:

"We wish to communicate to national and international public opinion"
U'wa United Refuge, Cubara, 25 August, 2004

If Ecopetrol continues to implement the Siriri project in U'wa territory, our culture will disappear.

With this statement we wish to remind and inform people that Ecopetrol and its associated companies such as Oxy (Occidental Petroleum Corporation) have destroyed indigenous cultures and the environment. We have clear examples: Guahibos in Arauca, the Motilones Bari in the North of Santander, the indigenous brothers from Putumayo, and now us. In these locations, violence, hunger, displacement, state neglect and absolute poverty predominate.

The Colombia Plan has facilitated the invasion of our lands by transnational oil companies such as Oxy. Because of the strong militarization of our lands, oil operations, such as exploration, exploitation and transportation of black gold from the Department of Arauca to Coveñas and the Gibraltar 1 project, are guaranteed. As a response to this need for oil security in Colombia, two rehabilitation zones have been set up, one of them in the Department of Arauca, which is directly affecting our territory.

Roberto Afanador Cobaria –Berito Kubaruwa– the President of the Upper Council appeared on 11 February before the mayor of the Municipality of Cubara. This U'wa leader has received the official order from our highest authorities to continue with the national and international campaign against the project for oil exploration that Ecopetrol is undertaking in the ancestral U'wa territory.

"We U'wa do not negotiate oil exploration in our sacred territory" - Official decision of the Sixth U'wa Association Congress, 19-26 January 2003.

Because Ecopetrol continues its seismic exploration in U'wa territory, we feel the need to reactivate the judicial complaint against the Colombian Government filed in May 1997 before the OAS Inter-American Commission for Human Rights. We also denounce and reject the offers of projects that Ecopetrol is giving to some communities as mechanisms and strategies to divide and weaken U'wa resistance.

Now, as before, the U'wa are asking Colombians and the whole World to appeal to the President of the Republic of Colombia, Dr Alvaro Uribe Velez and his ministers and demand respect for the right to life, culture and the environment of our territories, because Ecopetrol is causing irreparable human and environmental damage to the U'wa people, Colombia and the World.

Through its Upper Council, the U'wa people also denounce:

* That since last February, Ecopetrol has been carrying out a process of burning gas and extracting crude oil on a small scale in the Siriri block, without agreements having been signed with the U'wa Upper Council.

* That the contamination generated by burning gas causes serious health problems to the U'wa indigenous community, generating serious environmental problems with an impact on climatic change and also causing major landslides."

The U'wa people are appealing to the national and international community, to environmental movements and to human rights organizations asking them to "demand from the Colombian Government respect for the human and environmental rights of the U'wa indigenous people, and to order the Ecopetrol company the immediate suspension of burning gas and extracting crude oil."

They also categorically deny the rumours that the Upper Council has come to any agreement for oil exploitation in U'wa territory.

Article based on information from the U'wa Upper Council Press Communiqués of 25 August and 6 September 2004, e-mail: mozambique84@hotmail.com