
Ecuador: The Sarayacu people request support against ChevronTexaco's operations

Imagine an oil spill twice the size of the Exxon Valdez disaster. It happened indeed in the Amazon region of Ecuador between 1971 and 1991, when Texaco routinely dumped toxic wastes from its operations into the pristine rivers, forest streams and wetlands. As a result, 2.5 million acres of rainforest were lost (see www.amazonwatch.org/megaprojects/ec_chevttox/).

Indigenous peoples of the region continue to suffer an exploding health crisis, recording cancer rates 30 times higher than in non-oil producing areas of Ecuador. Between 1999 and 2001, the level of petroleum in the rivers, on which local residents depend for daily use, was 200 to 300 times higher than the limits set for human consumption (See www.imagenlatinoamericana.com/salud/salud_en.asp?articleid=225).

Texaco merged to become the colossal ChevronTexaco, and today it keeps pushing its oil operations deeper into the Ecuadorian rainforest. Keenly aware of the company's history of devastation, the Kichwa Sarayacu community is drawing a line at its borders. Numbering about 2,000, the Sarayacu live in Ecuador's south-western Amazon, downstream from ChevronTexaco's devastating path. "We still maintain our rivers, our forest, our biodiversity and our natural resources free from contamination and take care of this land," reads a Sarayacu community declaration.

"Sarayacu has title to our lands, and the company cannot ignore this." The company is, however, ignoring it in order to carry out explorations in Block 23, which covers the entire Sarayacu territory. In partnership with the Argentine oil company CGC, Chevron Texaco started conducting seismic tests in Sarayacu last Fall, detonating explosive charges day and night. Sarayacu elders, men, women and children formed a human chain along their borders to keep the oil workers out.

"We only have defended our territory against the aggression of the oil companies CGC/ChevronTexaco according to our customary rights, the Constitution of the Republic of Ecuador and International Conventions. The petroleum company attempts to slander us as terrorists to sway the attention away from the abuses they commit against our rights", declares Hilda Santi, vice president of Sarayacu.

In November an indigenous delegation of 600 filed a complaint with the federal Ombudsman or Protector of Constitutional Rights (Defensoría del Pueblo). They won a temporary injunction that prohibits the company from entering Sarayacu territory until Ecuador's newly elected president resolves the conflict. This legal protection was immediately violated by CGC/Chevron-Texaco; the company continues seismic activities and is contracting private armed security guards to enter Sarayacu territory, and intimidate the people, who have formed "camps of peace and life" where Sarayacu people and non-violent "witnesses" will stand against further company encroachment.

The supposed support by other communities within Block 23 toward the petroleum activity does not impress Sarayacu. "They achieved to bribe the leaders of some communities. Right now there are people that speak in the name of communities and in the name of the company. We lament the

situation, but we don't meddle in the internal affairs of other communities. Now they have finished the seismic exploration phase in their territories, and we have not lifted one finger to put obstacles. What we defend is what belongs to us."

In an message from the Yachaks (medicine people) of Sarayacu, Sabino Atanacio Gualinga Cuji, Yachak Representative, says: "In the course of our existence, we are responsible to use what nature has offered us in a rational manner so we may be able to exist harmoniously. Everything that exists in the world has a reason for existing; natural resources are no exception, petroleum is no exception. Nature has its own life, the rivers, lakes, mountains, trees and all that exists in nature. In the time of Shell Company's oil explorations [1940's], part of our nature already perished. With much pain we observed the extinction of many species. In the lakes we would find dead the immense anacondas, dolphins, freshwater seals, crocodiles. Little by little the beings of the rivers and mountains sought refuge. Recently these beings are recuperating because the wise Mother Nature recovers herself, but this takes many years and perhaps many of the species that existed before will not be found again. I earnestly ask you to help us take care of humanity, respecting the earth and Mother Nature. If each individual does their part, it will be enough and life will continue."

"CGC/ChevronTexaco has no right to violate, intervene, destroy our life and our future. It has to leave immediately, so we may re-establish harmony. We ask for support, solidarity and justice," says the declaration of the Kichwa Tayja Saruta Sarayacu Community. The Sarayacu people are requesting support by writing a letter to the president of Ecuador, with a copy to the CEO of ChevronTexaco, asking him to cancel contracts for oil exploration and give permanent protection to the Sarayacu territory. If you wish to send your support, please visit Global Response's web site:
http://www.globalresponse.org/gra_index/gra0103.html

Article based on information from: "Support Sarayacu People vs. Oil Development", Global Response Action Alert #1/03, January-February 2003; "Sarayacu Community: We are Victims of Terrorism by CGC/ChevronTexaco Oil Company", Sarayacu Amazon, Press Release, February 8, 2003, e-mail: sarayacuinfo@yahoo.com , <http://www.sarayacu.com> ; sent by OilWatch Network, e-mail: tegantai@oilwatch.org.ec