
Peru: Indigenous peoples and their forests threatened by gas exploitation

Within the ecological region of the Andean Belt, the Vilcabamba Cordillera in Peru is the only part where the original habitat has not been degraded. Together with the Urubamba Valley, they constitute a region where so far biodiversity has been conserved in an almost pristine state. Furthermore, it is a zone that fulfils important ecological processes --for the water system and climate change, among others-- essential both to the region and to the world in general. The zone is inhabited by numerous indigenous groups, some of them in a situation of initial contact and in voluntary isolation.

But this enormous natural wealth is being threatened by the Camisea Gas Project, carried out by the Pluspetrol-Hunt-SK group, a consortium involving capital from Argentina, the United States and Korea. The background to the project goes back to 1981, when Shell started prospecting in the zone, leading to the identification of gas deposits in Camisea, although it subsequently abandoned the project. In 1999, a call for bids was made for the exploitation of the deposits, and was awarded to the Pluspetrol-Hunt-SK group mentioned above, while transportation and distribution correspond to the Transportadora de Gas del Perú (TGP). The first phase alone of the project will demand an investment of 400 million dollars.

This mega project will require the construction of infrastructure and a number of facilities for exploitation, transport, processing, distribution and marketing of this hydrocarbon, with the opening up of trenches 1.5 metres wide, explosions over an area of 800 km², heliports and various camp sites that will cover 8.5 hectares, 6.400 unloading zones covering 23 hectares, 4 platforms and between 12 and 21 extraction pits, a network of pipelines, 2 pumping stations in the forest, in addition to the processing plant, landing strip, storage and camp sites, over an area of 72 hectares and involving between 500 and 1,000 workers. The addition of all these impacts will result in the destruction and degradation of large forest areas, including the disappearance of numerous species of fauna and flora. As a result, the local populations are seriously concerned.

For this reason, the Group of Interest comprising the indigenous organisations Machiguenga Council of the Urubamba River (COMARU) and the Inter-ethnic Association for the Development of the Peruvian Forest (AIDESEP), with the participation of the Centre for the Development of Amazonian Indigenous Peoples (CEDIA) and the international organisations, Amazon Watch, Amazon Alliance and Oxfam America, have promoted an independent revision of the Environmental Impact Assessment for the Carisea Gas Project in Peru.

The coordinator of the technical team and international specialist, Patricia Caffrey, presented the preliminary observations of the study at a press conference, noting that the project does not respect even the World Bank regulations or those of international best practice, that do not allow the degradation and conversion of tropical primary forests and require that the projects not only do not involve prejudice to the indigenous communities and people, but that they benefit them.

The Camisea project is far from complying with this requirement. Ms. Caffrey was working in the field, meeting with the heads of the indigenous communities involved and has reported that the

consultation processes have been deficient, that the “negotiation” process carried out is unfair, that the proposals for compensation are inadequate and that very probably the indigenous communities will be worse off as a consequence of the project. She also noted that it is almost impossible for any measures to be taken to mitigate the impacts of the mega project, that will degrade and convert primary tropical forests, alter the excellent conservation and pristine state these essential habitats have so far maintained, causing a major loss of biodiversity and causing prejudice to vital ecological processes.

Furthermore, the investigation has revealed that the consortium’s environmental impact assessments did not consider induced impacts and there are no detailed plans to mitigate important impacts such as control of access and way in which social development and conservation will be affected.

The route followed by the gas pipe-line will cover 700 km, from the forest to the sea, along a path 25 metres wide that will cross the Machiguenga Megantori Sanctuary and the Pavliv Nikitine Reserve (Vilcabamba Cordillera). Strong pressure has already been observed on the part of the companies to make the Machiguenga communities in the Urubamba consent to granting Right of Way, accepting payments for the right-of-way and compensations, without having adequate time, information or advice in order to grant this consent.

The Peruvian government has approved the project and has even announced that the Franco-Belgium company, Tractebel (a part of TGP) is interested in participating at the stage of gas distribution in Lima, at a time when the bases for the privatisation of the four regional electricity companies are being established.

In the meanwhile, at international fora, the government talks of its commitment towards biodiversity conservation....But the path of a “development” of which even the content of the word has been usurped, goes another way and many governments follow it --those from the North with their power, those from the South with their weakness-- as well as transnational corporations with the endorsement of international banks and multilateral organisations. In defence of biological diversity and of life, it would seem that the only voices that remain are the suffocated voices of the indigenous peoples, their traditional knowledge, their ancestral community practices that, together with some social groups and NGOs are the light along the way. Let us hope that this light shines at the next conference of the parties to the Biodiversity Convention and that the Peruvian authorities learn how to listen to the voice of their people.

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