Ecuador: Call for action to stop oil pipeline

The Ecuadorian government has signed a contract with the company Oleoductos de Crudos Pesados (OCP) to build a pipeline that will cross the country from east to west, through the three geographical regions that form its territory. It will affect fragile areas of great importance from an ecological and agricultural point of view.

The 500 km long pipeline will transport low quality crude oil. Most of this oil will come from an oil block situated within the Yasuní National Park, which has not yet been leased for exploitation. This constitutes the last pristine area in the Park, which is the most important of continental Ecuador, and the home of the Huaorani indigenous people. There is also the risk that the oil frontier will reach the Amazonian territories of southern Ecuador, still relatively unaltered, where the Quichua, Shuar and Achuar indigenous people live.

OCP Ecuador is a consortium formed by Agip, Alberta, Kerr Mc Gee, Occidental, YPF, Perez Companc and Techint. The works would be carried out by the Argentinian company Techint, whose environmental record is abysmal. The total cost will exceed U$S 1,100 million, but according to local sources this cost is overvaluated, taking into account that the cost for the same oil pipeline was estimated in U$S 400 in 1999. In the long run, the difference in cost will be paid by the Ecuadorian people.

The route of the pipeline was approved before an environmental impact assessment was carried out, which is a legal requirement under the Environmental Management Law. The National Constitution establishes that prior to such kind of works a consultation among affected people needs to be performed, which did not take place in this case. After the approval of the project, the consultancy firm ENTRIX was given only two months to produce an environmental impact assessment, which is obviously insufficient taking into account that the 500 km pipeline will pass through extremely complex ecosystems.

Given that the pipeline will cross the entire country from east to west, it will also cross all the geological fault systems affecting Ecuador, which contains at least 94 faults. Several active volcanoes are in the way of the projected route of the pipeline, among which the Reventador, Antisana, the volcanic complex of Chacama, Guagua Pichincha and Pululahua. The Guagua Pichincha is of particular concern given that it erupted recently. A violent eruption would mean that the pipeline would be exposed to ashes, landslides and lava flows.

The pipeline would be built on vulnerable and prone to erosion soils, in regions of heavy rainfall where landslides frequently occur. Part of the pipeline would pass through an area with a high concentration of schools, which would endanger the most vulnerable part of the population: the children.

The pipeline would also pass through other fragile and ecologically important areas and would in fact cross all the country's ecosystems, including the sources of creeks and rivers, high quality agricultural zones, areas composed of unstable and seismically active land, primary tropical forests, etc. Almost

40 villages would be affected by the project.

The projected route would pass through the valley of Mindo, considered by many ornithologists to be the World's Bird Capital because of it being the area with the highest bird concentration per unit in South America. The pipeline would destroy important wildlife corridors, affecting the local fauna. Local people's livelihoods depend on cattle raising and tourism and both activities would be seriously affected by both the construction and the future functioning of the pipeline. The pipeline would also cross other protected areas and forests which prevent erosion processes in the foothills of the Andes.

The proximity to Colombia implies an additional risk, since more than 760 attacks have been carried out against pipelines in that country during the past 10 years. Since Ecuador is participating in the Plan Colombia and given that violence in that country is increasing, the new pipeline could become an important military target. In fact, during the past year the Trans Ecuadorian Pipeline System (SOTE) has already been the target of four attacks.

The consequences of inadequately planned pipelines are already well known in Ecuador. Such is the case of SOTE, built by Texaco 30 years ago, which has collapsed several times, provoking the loss of human lives.

Acción Ecológica has for several years been promoting a moratorium to the expansion of oil exploitation in the tropics and is now urging all those individuals and organizations who believe that the Amazon must survive to support the campaign against the construction of this pipeline and against the expansion of oil exploitation to the last primary forests in the Ecuadorian Amazon. If you wish to support this campaign, please address a letter to the Ministry of Energy and Mines