
Peru: Who pays the bill for oil exploitation "accidents"?

The spill of 5,500 barrels of oil at the Marañón River that occurred on October 3rd 2000 in the heart of the Peruvian Amazon, at Urarinas and Parinari Districts in the Province of Loreto, constitutes an ecological disaster, whose consequences are still provoking damages to the environment and to the indigenous population of the area. The spill affected the Pacaya Samiria Reserve, which is the biggest protected area in the country. Responsible for both the accident and the present situation is the transnational Pluspetrol based in Argentina.

It has been estimated that the spill has affected some 20,000 people, many of whom belonging to the Cocamas-Cocamillas ethnic group. The pollution of water has completely altered their everyday life, since they drink the water of the river, bathe and play in it. Fishing, which is their basic resource, is impeded by the contamination of the river and the death of its fauna. Cases of diarrhea and skin diseases have spread. The doctors hired by the company and those of the Ministry of Health cannot cope with all the patients. Additionally, it has been denounced that part of the medicines sent to the area never reached the place and were illegally sold in Iquitos.

"The company has not wished to help us at any moment, only with a little food and with very, very little drinking water", expressed the local priest Miguel Angel Cadenas. According to testimonies of missionary nuns working in the area, the food provided by Pluspetrol is of low quality and provisions were not enough even as a basic diet for all the affected people.

Instead of truly assisting local people affected by the disaster it caused, Pluspetrol is more concentrated in trying to promote a "green" and "humanitarian" image of itself to the public. Those who receive the scarce quantity of food and water supplied by the company have to sign a document of "gratitude" to Pluspetrol for the support received. Additionally, the company will soon be presenting an Environmental Impact Assessment, according to which the presence of oil in the Marañón River's waters has decreased after the accident, which is difficult to believe.

National NGOs have denounced that this is not the first time Pluspetrol is involved in this kind of problems. In November 1999 an oil pipeline belonging to the company broke in the Pucayacu ravine, in the Chambira River. A number of Urarina indigenous people got sick and even died. They are claiming that the contracts with Pluspetrol should be reviewed and that oil transportation be strictly controlled. The environmental consequences of oil exploitation in the tropics --among which heavy metal pollution due to waste material from the wells, massive flares in the forest and risk of explosion caused by gas escapes-- and the social impacts it provokes, clearly show that the above referred oil spill is not just an "accident." In the calculation of oil companies, this is only an expected risk. But it is always indigenous and other local people, and their forests and waters, who have to bear the costs.

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