
Colombia: the U'wa people do not surrender

In a new chapter of their seemingly endless struggle to defend their land rights, a group of two hundred U'wa indigenous people -including women, children and tribal elders- established on November 14 a permanent settlement at the site of Occidental Petroleum's planned oil well Gibraltar 1. Their aim is to block the drilling planned to begin operating in the near future, thus avoiding that their Mother Earth be profaned. Hundreds of more U'wa and other supporters are expected to continue arriving to the settlement in upcoming days to reinforce this action. Tribal leaders consider that this permanent settlement is a necessary action to block the drilling after legal battles and direct appeals to the company and the government have failed to date.

On November 16th, the Second U'wa Audience for Life was held in Bogota, attended by a large number of U'wa and more than 100 delegates of national and international organizations of indigenous peoples, environmentalists, black communities and social groups who support them. On the following day, a large demonstration which began at the National University of Colombia and went to the headquarters of the Ministry of the Environment took place, where the representatives of the U'wa demanded once again President Andres Pastrana and the Minister of the Environment, Juan Mayr, the immediate cancellation of oil exploration in the Samore area. Until now, the authorities have turned a deaf ear to the U'wa's demand. After countless meetings with the environmental authorities to discuss this problem, the U'wa have now refused to participate in the so called Environmental Alliance for Colombia, to which the government is summoning. "It is not more than the government's farce to obtain resources under the name of the environmental emergencies of the country, while its actions show contempt or violent solutions to the environmental conflicts" states a declaration of the U'wa leaders.

Sources: Patrick Reinsborough, RAN, 19/11/99, e-mail: rags@ran.org; Censat Agua Viva, 23/11/99,