
Colombia: the U'wa achieve significant victory

As a result of a long and difficult struggle against giant Occidental Petroleum and the Colombian government, the U'wa indigenous people have achieved a significant victory with the legal recognition of an area comprising an important portion of their traditional territory in the northeastern corner of Colombia. A recent resolution of the Colombian government, in agreement with the U'wa leaders, has increased their legally recognized territory in 120,000 hectares, which now comprises 220,275 hectares in the provinces of Boyaca, Northern Santander, Santander and Arauca. It will be called Unified U'wa Reserve. The official resolution undoubtedly represents a significant victory for the U'wa and an important step for the recognition of the whole of their traditional territory.

Nevertheless, the oil threat is still looming on them: the Ministry of the Environment is considering a request of environmental license for exploratory drilling by Occidental Petroleum just outside the recently created Reserve in the Gibraltar area. The negative environmental and social impacts of the project constitute a serious threat to the U'wa's physical and cultural survival, since activities of oil prospection and extraction in Colombia are associated to human rights abuses, corruption and violence. "As we recover part of our territory that you are formally handing over to us today, we request absolute respect for our position to not allow any oil exploration or production on our traditional lands, either inside or outside the territory that has been legally recognized as ours," said Roberto Perez, President of the U'wa governing body, at a ceremony intended to celebrate the creation of the reserve.

The U'wa Defense Working Group is circulating a sign-on letter related on this problem, to be sent to the Ministry of the Environment of Colombia.

Sources: Drillbits & Tailings, Vol. 4, Nr. 13, 25/8/99; Censat Agua Viva, 30/8/99; Steve Kretzmann, 2/9/99;