
Colombia: U'wa victory at Occidental's shareholder meeting

The recent murders of three activists - Ingrid Washinawatok, a member of the Menominee tribe from New York, Terence Freitas, from Oakland, and Lahe'ena'e Gay, from Hawaii- who were assisting the U'wa indigenous people to protect their land from oil drilling, illustrate the high level of violence in conflicts concerning the use of resources and territorial issues in the South American rainforests and calls into question U.S. foreign policy (see WRM Bulletin 21)

The U'wa Defense Working Group, an environmental NGO based in California, is calling for an investigation into the "role of multinational oil companies in the ongoing cycle of violence in the region". On February 25, members of the Colombian rebel group Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) kidnapped U'wa leader Roberto Cobaría and the three Americans. Cobaría was immediately released but the Americans were held. In 1997 Cobaría, after meeting with Occidental Petroleum in Los Angeles was kidnapped and beaten on his return to Colombia by gunmen who tried to force him to sign a drilling agreement. With regard to this abuse Cobaría testified to Amnesty International and complained to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. FARC were responsible for the murder of the American activists, claimed as "a mistake" committed by a commander that acted on his own initiative.

The USA have devoted large sums of money to "aid" Colombia in the war against drug cartels and leftist rebels. For example, last April the United States pledged the \$240 million of military aid to the Colombian "peace process". But this aid includes money for more military aircraft and weapons. Human Rights Watch reported that of the 40,000 civilians killed in Colombia since 1989, the majority were victims of US-backed military groups. Violence is also used in the American territory itself. On April 28th U'wa leaders and hundreds of activists who demonstrated in memory of the three murdered Americans outside of Occidental Petroleum's headquarters in Los Angeles were rejected by the police, and 20 of them were arrested.

Even facing this kind of difficulties, the environmental and human rights movement scored a significant victory on April 30th at Occidental Petroleum's shareholder meeting in Santa Monica, as 13% of Occidental Petroleum shareholders, totaling over 40,000,000 shares, voted in favour of a resolution to carry out an analysis on the risks associated with the oil project planned for U'wa people's lands in the Colombian rainforest. "In the world of shareholder activism, a thirteen percent vote is a huge victory. I don't believe Oxy can go ahead with this project without upsetting its major shareholders" said Atossa Soltani, Director of Amazon Watch. Leaders of the U'wa nation, who arrived in Los Angeles after a three-day journey from their homes high in Colombia's cloud forest, also addressed Occidental Petroleum meeting, asked shareholders to encourage the company to cancel the oil project planned for their ancestral territory. U'wa leader Berito Kuwaru'wa sang a traditional song in U'wa language describing petroleum as "the blood of the Earth." The U'wa's plea is particularly urgent as Occidental has applied for an environmental license from the Colombian government to drill its first well on the U'wa's land.

What follows is an international communique from the Association of Traditional U'wa Authorities issued in Kerachikara, at the sacred U'wa's territory in April 1999:

"For thousands of years the U'wa people have lived in territories known today as the Departments of Casanare, Arauca, Boyaca, Santander and North of Santander, Colombia. This gives us the right to demand that the Colombian government and multinational oil corporations fully recognize and respect our territory, as well as all resources that belong to us -all of which are recognized as ours by the National Constitution and national and international laws.

The U'wa people have consistently reiterated that we will not give up our ancient rights to the interests of the state and multinational companies. In Colombia we have exhausted all existing legal channels to solve the conflict between the U'wa and Occidental Petroleum. None of our efforts in Colombia have produced the necessary measures needed to respect the rights of the U'wa people.

Because the Colombian government has not recognized our rights as a distinct people, we have been obliged to reach out to the national and international community (governments, environmental and human rights organizations, and indigenous peoples -all who work for life and peace). They have, without restraint, joined our cause.

The lack of recognition and violation by the Colombian government and multinational corporations (ie. Occidental) of the historical rights and heritage of the U'wa people forces us to demand the following demands:

1. We reaffirm the demand of the U'wa people for the cancellation of oil activities in our ancestral territory.
2. We express the urgent need for the recuperation of our land, to which we have a right, in order to guarantee life. The Colombian government should promise to enlarge the existing reserve and to respect our ancestral territories.
3. We reaffirm that for the U'wa, our territory, natural resources and our people are not objects to be negotiated. They should be respected according to the laws of nature.

Objectives

1. Consolidate international solidarity in support of our just cause for territory, culture, and oral history.
2. Demonstrate with concrete examples the destructive processes that oil activities such as Oxy's bring to our people and our environment.
3. Demonstrate that the model of development promoted by the U'wa people is an alternative for all humanity that will guarantee the life of this planet under the principles of sustainable development.

Signed by: Roberto Pérez Gutiérrez, President of the Traditional U'wa Council; Roberto Cobaría Berito Kubaruwa, Official Delegate of the Traditional U'wa Authorities; Javier Vesga Florez, Advisor to the Traditional U'wa Council."

Sources: "Colombia's U'wa Indians Battling Violence, Oil Interests. Environmental group is calling for an investigation" by Jane Ayers, San Francisco Chronicle, 30/4/1999, sent by Randy Hayes 30/4/1999.