
[Support to the U'wa people in Colombia](#)

The U'wa of the Colombian cloud forest are in a life-and-death struggle to protect their traditional culture and sacred homeland from an oil project slated to begin on their land at anytime. The U'wa are adamantly opposed to the drilling and warn that the project will lead to an increase in violence as seen in other oil regions of Colombia. Despite this, Los Angeles-based Occidental Petroleum and the Colombian government continue to move forward with plans to drill. The U'wa have made a call for international support; now is the time for us to answer.

The U'wa's opposition to the oil project is so strong that they have vowed to commit collective suicide if Occidental Petroleum and the Colombian government proceed with the oil project on their ancestral lands. The U'wa, a traditional people some 5,000 members strong, explain they prefer a death by their own hand than the slow death to their environment and culture oil will bring. A core tenet of U'wa culture and spirituality is the belief that the land that has sustained them for centuries is sacred. They strongly believe that to permit oil exploration on these sacred lands would upset the balance of the world. In the words of the U'wa, "Oil is the blood of Mother Earth...to take the oil is, for us, worse than killing your own mother. If you kill the Earth, then no one will live."

The U'wa people's struggle recently exploded into the public arena with the tragic March 5th murders in Colombia of three indigenous rights activists: Terence Freitas, Ingrid Washinawatok and Lahe'ane'e Gay. Terence had devoted the last two years of his life to supporting the U'wa in their campaign to stop Occidental's oil project, reclaim their ancestral homeland and protect their traditional culture. Ingrid and Lahe'ane'e were coordinating with the U'wa to launch an educational project designed to maintain and promote the U'wa's traditional way-of-life.

The U'wa fear that the recent murders are but a harbinger of the wider physical violence the oil project bring to their people. Throughout Colombia, oil and violence are linked inextricably. Occidental's Cano Limon pipeline, just north of U'wa territory, has been attacked by leftist guerillas more than 500 times in its 12 years of existence, spilling some 1.7 million barrels of crude oil into the soil and rivers. The Colombian government has militarized oil production and pipeline zones, often persecuting local populations the government assumes are helping the guerrillas. Oil projects have already taken their toll on many other indigenous peoples of Colombia, including the Yarique, Kofan and Secoya.

The current drilling plans threaten the survival of both the U'wa and their environment. The U'wa's cloud forest homeland in the Sierra Nevada de Cocuy mountains near the Venezuelan border is one of the most delicate, endangered forest ecosystems on the planet. It is an area rich in plant and animal life unique to the region, and the U'wa depend on the balance and bounty of the forest for their survival. Where oil companies have operated in other regions of the Amazon basin, cultural decay, toxic pollution, land invasions and massive deforestation have followed.

Occidental first received an exploration license for the 2 billion barrels oil field the equivalent of three months of U.S. consumption-- in 1992. Since then, the U'wa have voiced their consistent opposition to the oil project. They have taken a variety of actions to halt the project including the filing of lawsuits

against the government in Colombia, petitioning the Organization of American States to intervene, appealing directly with Occidental's top executives, and reaching out to company shareholders. Currently, Colombia's Ministry of the Environment is considering Occidental's application for a drilling license, the next hurdle the company must clear to proceed with the project. In the face of mounting violence in the region and Occidental's pressure on the government to approve the drilling permit, the urgency of the U'wa's struggle has never been so great.

"We are seeking an explanation for this 'progress' that goes against life. We are demanding that this kind of progress stop, that oil exploitation in the heart of the Earth is halted, that the deliberate bleeding of the Earth stop." --Statement of the U'wa people, August, 1999

A number of actions are being organized by the U'wa Defense Working Group, whose members are: Amazon Coalition, Amazon Watch, Action Resource Center, Earthjustice Legal, Defense Fund, EarthWays Foundation, International Law Project for Human Environmental & Economic Defense, Project Underground, Rainforest Action Network, Sol Communications. Those interested in participating in these actions, please contact any of those organizations.

Source: Rainforest Action Network U'wa Work.