
Ecuador: the Cofan's successful action against an oil well

While government officials were politely exchanging speeches in Buenos Aires at the 4th Conference of the Parties of the Climate Change Convention, -all of them referring to the need of conserving the world's forests as a way of mitigating the impacts of climate change- a group of indigenous people, in a much less comfortable situation, were doing in Ecuador something far more concrete to this end.

Last October a group of Cofan indigenous peoples occupied and closed the Dureno 1 oil well, near Lago Agrio city in the northeastern region of Ecuador, as an action of protest against the activities of the oil industry in their ancestral territories. The well -located only 20 metres away from the water sources of the Cofan community- had been polluting this precious resource and depleting the flora and fauna of the area. "We have lived in this ancestral territory, as guardians of this forest, for centuries, as its sons and only owners. We have offered land, food, materials, work, for what they call 'development' and during this process we are just getting poorer and poorer and even risking our possibilities of surviving as a people" stated a spokesperson of the Cofan. The occupation, initiated on October 12th (anniversary of the date when the continent's indigenous peoples suffered the Spanish invasion) ended on the 22nd, after having achieved their purposes.

Initially, the Ecuadorean government had reacted by sending soldiers to the conflict area, trying to frighten the Cofans, stating that it would not negotiate "under pressure". However, the government finally agreed to carry out a number of important actions such as:

- 1) The removal of the storage tanks and gas flares and the closure of the waste pool
- 2) The establishment of a commission with similar number of government and Cofan's advisors, to take a decision on the closure of the oil well, which will take into account economic, environmental and engineering matters
- 3) The legalization of the Cofan's territory, most of which lies within the protected area system
- 4) The creation of a team -including NGO representatives- to verify pollution and the necessity for a clean-up operation in the rivers that cross their territory
- 5) The acceptance of the need to financially compensate the Cofan for the damages suffered due to oil exploitation. The Cofan decided that the compensation money will be dedicated to the purchase of land, where forest will be allowed to regrow.

In sum, the action carried out by the Cofan people has had very positive results and they now have a unique opportunity to reverse the damage inflicted to people and the environment by the oil industry.

Source: Oilwatch, Accion Ecologica, Ecuador, November 1998