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## Colombia: U'wa indigenous peoples confront oil companies

Responding to the immediate and increasing threat of oil exploration on their lands, the U'wa people have issued a statement demanding that both the Colombian government and Occidental Petroleum recognize their right to refuse or accept oil activity on their land as a precondition to any dialogue about oil development. The statement also demands an immediate withdrawal of the military presence in U'wa territory, which has increased dramatically over the last month.

The U'wa, a nation of 5,000 living in the Andean cloud forests, have previously stated that any extraction of oil on their land will lead to their committing mass suicide, a possibility still open (see WRM Bulletin nr. 1).

The demands by the U'wa are the latest development in the legal process pending before the Inter American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) of the Organization of American States (OAS). The case was filed in May 1997 by the Traditional U'wa Authority, the National Indigenous Organization of Colombia, and the Amazon Coalition, in an attempt to gain legal recognition of the U'wa's sovereignty over their ancestral homeland and resources. "Now they say that the government wants to know our thoughts about the oil project, but if they don't like what we think, they will simply proceed with their own decisions" said Roberto Cobarria, President of the Traditional U'wa Authority.

Exploration rights to the U'wa territory, known to the oil companies as "Samore block" are held by a consortium led by the Los Angeles based Occidental Petroleum which includes Shell as an equal partner. Colombian oil developments are an increasingly popular target of the country's rebels and U'wa community leaders fear this will become another factor for increasing violence in their lands.

Sources: Drillbits & Tailings, March 7, 1998; Volume 3, Number 5.