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Ecuadoran Government Set to Resume Armadillo Oil Project Despite Opposition from Indigenous Communities, Environmentalists

By Luis Ángel Saavedra

The Ecuadoran government reopened a call for tenders for the Armadillo oil field, in the Amazonian province of Orellana, where evidence has been found of settlements and movement of the Tagaeri and Taromenane peoples, who remain in voluntary isolation.

The new call for tenders has produced a controversy, not only among environmentalists, the indigenous movement, and the government but also within the government team, since the Tagaeri and Taromenane peoples are beneficiaries of protective measures called for by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR).

President Rafael Correa announced a government policy to protect these peoples, creating the Plan de Remediación Ambiental y Social in 2008 and the Plan de Medidas Cautelares. The plans aim to implement the best alternatives to achieve what the government and the IACHR agreed to. Officials from the Ministerio de Medio Ambiente, in charge of carrying out the policy, have been astonished by the decision to accept bids for Campo Armadillo, since this completely contradicts the policy set in 2008.

As on other occasions, the president has been very sarcastic in the face of criticisms of the call for tenders for the oil concession and has responded by asking for reports on the activities of a number of international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that operate in Ecuador and fund activities of environmental and indigenous organizations.

A strategic field

Campo Armadillo is defined as a "marginal field," one without significant oil production, and, although it will contribute somewhat to the national budget, revenue from it will be modest.

Although the field will not significantly support the national economy, it does have a strategic value—its proximity to the Parque Nacional Yasuni, site of the Ishpingo-Tambococha-Tiputini (ITT) bloc, the nation's largest oil reserve and the object of an international campaign to seek compensation for not exploiting the oil and conserving the high biodiversity in the area, also declared intangible.

The failure of negotiations with the countries that showed an interest in consolidating a group of donors, which was the result of the government's own ambiguity in defending the rights of nature, has now led the government to consider exploiting this field. To that end, it has speeded up implementation of base camps and is negotiating with local authorities to support the project.

Strategically, Campo Armadillo, being close to Parque Yazuní, could provide the basic infrastructure for exploiting ITT and could facilitate connection of the oil pipelines needed to transport the crude. However, its principal strategic value lies more on the social plane.

The bidding for Campo Armadillo is revealing the opposition forces that the government will have to confront at the time of any exploitation of ITT, forces grouped together in social organizations, led by the indigenous movement and environmentalists, as well as opposition that could come from inside the government.

In this respect, calling for tenders for Campo Armadillo could be useful for the government to carry out a new purge within the administration and get rid of civil servants who still believe that ecology and respect for the rights of nature should be state policy, as called for in the 2008 Constitution.

The bidding could also allow the government to do mapping and measure the strength of the organizations that oppose expanding the oil frontier. No wonder the government began to monitor precisely those NGOs that support the work of the indigenous and environmentalists.

Allegation of genocide

President Correa has questioned the state's responsibility to protect the hidden peoples; he has even made regrettable comments regarding the rights of these peoples, such as his statements in May 2010 on one of his Saturday national radio broadcasts. "They don't want Armadillo to be exploited because it is near uncontacted groups. God does not want us to see uncontacted people in Quito, and we have to evacuate Quito," Correa said sarcastically during the broadcast.

Encounters with uncontacted indigenous peoples have been fatal for settlers and loggers who live near Campo Armadillo and Parque Yazuní. In March 2008, a logger was killed; in August 2009, a woman and her two children were killed. These deaths, at the hands of members of these peoples, were in response to threats directed against them, since they had been attacked on several occasions.

The logging and oil companies have not hesitated to incite violence against the uncontacted peoples, for which they have used members of the Waorani tribe. One example was the 2003 attack led by Waorani groups from Tiguino against the Tagaeris, in which some 20 people died--women and children since the adult male warriors were not at the site of the attack.

The 2003 attack on the Tagaeri and the responding defensive actions in 2008 and 2009 led government sectors to look for ways to protect the peoples in voluntary isolation. This stopped the bidding for Campo Armadillo; however, the new call puts a death sentence on the heads of these peoples.

In Ecuador, the disappearance of indigenous peoples as a result of oil activities is not uncommon. In the 1980s, the Tetetes and Sansahuaris, two peoples that suffered the ravages of Texaco activities, disappeared. The same might happen now to the Tagaeri and Taromenane.

To prevent the disappearance of these peoples, the Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador (CONAIE) filed a legal complaint against President Correa for genocide, claiming that his extractive policy will cause the death of the uncontacted peoples. The

complaint filed on March 29 in a court in the Ecuadoran capital was dismissed because the court said there were no signs that the government was intervening in Campo Armadillo or in ITT. However, the new bidding for Armadillo reinstates the complaint, which is now before the IACHR, awaiting a report of admissability.

The IACHR will have to consider current preventive measures for protecting the Tagaeri and Taromenane and contradictions in the Eucadoran governmental policy in deciding whether the CONAIE complaint will move forward. Meanwhile, Ecuadoran social organizations, which include indigenous and environmentalists as well as local Catholic Church sectors, campesino networks, and human rights movements, are preparing to block companies from entering Campo Armadillo, possibly provoking a confrontation that will be but a taste of what is likely to happen when the government decides to exploit ITT.