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# ECUADOR: "HUAORANI WILL NOT DIE" -- INDIGENOUS GROUP CONFRONTS GOVERNMENT AND OIL COMPANIES IN DEFENSE OF THEIR LAND

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## **ECUADOR: "HUAORANI WILL NOT DIE"--INDIGENOUS GROUP CONFRONTS GOVERNMENT AND OIL COMPANIES IN DEFENSE OF THEIR LAND**

[The following article by Luis Angel Saavedra is reprinted with the permission of Noticias Aliadas in Lima, Peru. It appeared in the July 27, 2005, edition of Latinamerica Press.]

The Huaorani people who inhabit the Ecuadoran Amazon decided to put an end to the oil exploitation that is destroying their land and their traditional way of life that is based on hunting, fishing, and gathering.

"The Huaorani was a society that had little division of labor within the family," said Esperanza Martiez of Ecological Action, an organization working with the Huaorani to defend their land. "They hunted together and shared housework, farm work, and the raising of the children. The leaders were the elders and the decisions were taken by the community as a whole."

The Huaorani, along with the Tagaeri and Taromenane, are people who lived isolated from Western society. In the last few years, however, they have come face to face with oil and lumber companies (see *NotiSur*, 1993-01-19, 2002-09-27, 2003-11-07, *Chronicle*, 1994-04-28). These companies have even created divisions among these peoples; some confrontations became startlingly violent, such as one two years ago when Huaorani involved with lumber companies massacred a Taromenane community (see [NotiSur, 2003-06-13](#)).

In a public denouncement of the abuses they have suffered at the hand of the oil companies, Moi Enomenga, a Huaorani leader, organized a march of 22 Huaorani communities to the capital, Quito, on July 12.

### **The long road**

Men and women of these communities walked 40 km through the jungle, and took a 12-hour bus ride until they reached Quito's streets to protest the concessions approved by the government of former President Lucio Gutierrez (2003-2005) and an agreement signed in January between the Brazilian oil company Petrobras and former leaders of the Organizacion del la Nacionalidad Huaorani de la Amazonia Ecuatoriana (ONHAE) that granted Petrobras access to their land for oil exploration and exploitation.

"The communities of the Huaorani people reject the agreement signed by the former ONHAE president, Armando Boya, because he did not consult the communities and does not represent what we want for our future. No ONHAE leader has the right to sign anything with anyone without the consent of our communities," Enomenga said.

For her part, Alicia Cahuiya, president of the Huaorani women's association, confirmed the community consensus: "We want our land free of oil companies for our children."

The agreement signed by ONHAE and Petrobras included the financing of development and social-assistance projects for the Huaorani in the amount of US\$200,000 annually over the next five years.

The march was received by the entire National Congress as well as by Interior Minister Mauricio Gandara. Both legislative and executive branches promised to revise the agreements involving the Huaorani land, especially because these lands are within the limits of the Yasuni National Park.

The Yasuni National Park, founded in 1979, has an area of 679,730 hectares, a third of which historically belongs to the Huaorani. On April 2, 1990, the government reduced the park's area so that the hydrocarbon zone (block 16) would be left outside the park's perimeters, allowing the entrance of the US company Maxus, and later, the Spanish company Repsol-YPF.

Later, the Gutierrez administration compromised the last Huaorani lands handing them over to Petrobras and the Canadian company EnCana.

In 1992, Maxus constructed a 180-km highway that cuts through the park, while Petrobras and Repsol-YPF began construction of a road to access their exploration camps. These companies contracted Entrix, a US consultant firm with an environmental focus, to negotiate with the affected indigenous communities.

### **No telecommunications**

According to Entrix, the agreements by the previous ONHAE leadership benefit the communities and provide all the security measures needed, but some of them were illogical. In case of an emergency, such as an oil spill, notices written in Spanish informed residents to call one of two numbers: a cell phone and a landline in Quito.

These notices were posted in a forested zone where neither cell-phone coverage nor conventional telephones were available. In addition, very few in the community speak Spanish.

"The leaders accepted money from the oil companies, but the community does not want any money, and we do not want any community mediators from Entrix negotiating with us. They are here only to destroy our culture," said Moi.

The Huaorani are conscious that they have started a tough battle, and with the march they wanted to express themselves in front of the government and Ecuadoran society, but they know that their toughest resistance will be in the jungle, in their own territory.

"We have come to make war here in the city, but if we lose here we'll have to make war back there, and there, we will win," said Moi while men and women yelled, "The Huaorani will not die."