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Illegal Logging in Ecuador Have Led to Massacre

by LADB Staff

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Local police and the Organizacion de Nacionalidad Huaorani de la Amazonia Ecuatoriana (ONHAE) say illegal loggers operating in the Ecuadoran Amazon region appear to have instigated a conflict between two indigenous groups that led to the deaths of at least 16 Taromenane Indians in the remote eastern jungle province of Pastaza.

ONHAE vice president Camilo Huamoni said on May 29 that the organization had received reports that a group of Huaorani Indians had killed 16 members of the Taromenane-Tagaeri tribe on May 26. He said the attackers used rifles and spears. Huamoni said other Huaorani had told him of the attack.

A spokesperson for the Confederacion de Nacionalidades Indigenas del Ecuador (CONAIE) said he had also heard rumors of the massacre in Tiguino, 200 km southeast of Quito on the Peruvian border and a five-day hike from the nearest road.

Other news reports said that some Huaorani who claimed to have taken part in the killing said it was an act of revenge against the Taromenane who had killed some members of their family several years ago.

As much as 50% of Ecuador's 12.5 million people are indigenous people belonging to 12 ethnic groups, the largest being the Kichwa, who live in the highlands as well as the Amazon jungle. The Amazon is also home to the Cofan, Siona, Secoya, Huaorani, Achuar, Shuar, and Zapara.

Ecuador's indigenous people are perhaps the best organized in Latin America. Through the Pachakutik Movement, they have gained political standing and are now allied with the government of President Lucio Gutierrez, who took office in January (see NotiSur, 2003-01-17, 2003-02-14). Tagaeri one of continent's most isolated groups The Taromenane-Tagaeri, a subgroup of the Huaorani, have had minimal contact with the outside world or even other indigenous groups and live deep in the jungle, surviving by hunting and fishing. They fiercely defend their territory from outsiders.

The Huaorani have had more interaction with the outside and even have an office in the capital of Pastaza, Puyo, 180 km southeast of Quito. The Huaorani used to number in the tens of thousands, but now are only about 2,000. Their territory, which overlaps with the Parque Nacional Yasuni and covers parts of Pastaza and Orellana provinces, continues to be threatened by oil development and colonization.

In 1990 the Huaorani were granted communal legal title to more than 600,000 hectares of their territory, in the largest title grant to that date. It was, however, only about a third of traditional

Huaorani land and did not include the rights to subsoil minerals. Not only do the Huaorani not own the oil under their land, but provisions in the title agreement forbid them to obstruct oil development and prohibit them from receiving any royalties from the oil.

Since 1999, a million ha in the Amazon has been a "protected area" and barred from "any kind of oil, mining, or lumber activity or colonization, which could threaten the area's diversity." The protected area includes the Parque Yasuni and the traditional lands of the Tagaeri-Taromenane and Huaorani people. Despite the designation as a protected area, the land has been under constant attack from outsiders, especially oil companies and illegal loggers.

ONHAE has repeatedly complained that loggers and oil companies are ignoring the restrictions on exploiting natural resources in the protected area and show no regard for the environment where the Taromenane and Tagaeri live.

Oil company representatives say their activity is legal and meets all environmental requisites of the Ministry of Energy and Mines. Much logging, however, is done illegally.

In March 2002, the Quito newspaper El Comercio reported that 16 groups of loggers had been found "indiscriminately cutting down the primary forest" with chainsaws. The timber was floated down the Tiguino river to the nearest road. "Up to 400 logs at a time are floated out and taken away by highway," said the article. "On some days, between four and six vehicles loaded with wood drive out of the area."

Loggers blamed for massacre

ONHAE president Armando Boya believes that the illegal loggers provoked the killing. "Nobody is supposed to enter that area by presidential decree, and the loggers paid locals to allow them in," he said. A local police officer said that "only the loggers in the area could have given firearms to the community in Tiguino, because the site of the massacre is practically inaccessible."

ONHAE leader Manuela Omari said, "The loggers complain that the Tagaeri keep them from felling trees by attacking them. In March last year, the Tagaeri used spears to kill three loggers who were cutting down the forest." She said the loggers were "directly responsible" because "they paid a group of 12 Huaorani Indians from Tiguino to kill the Tagaeri, so the loggers could work in that area."

Shuar leader and president of the Consejo de Desarrollo de las Nacionalidades y Pueblos de Ecuador (CODENPE) Marcelino Chumpi said an investigation by a high-level commission had verified that loggers had paid the Huaorani to force the Tagaeri to relocate deeper in the jungle so the loggers could cut trees in the area. Regarding the claim by some Huaorani that it was a revenge killing, Chumpi said regardless of the family feuds between the Huaorani and their Tagaeri and Taromenane kin, it was evident the loggers had interfered and played up the feud for their own purposes, which led to the massacre.

On June 2, there were unofficial reports that a group of Tagaeri had set fire to cabins in a tourist center in the Amazon on May 30 in retaliation for the deaths of their people. The reports said the Tagaeri had arrived at a tourist complex four hours from Tiguino and burned a reception cabin and two other guest cabins. No one was hurt in the incident. Huaorani Indians who work at the tourist center said the Tagaeri attacked because they knew the Huaorani worked there.

On May 29, the Coordinadora de Organizaciones Indigenas de la Cuenca Amazonica (COICA) condemned the killing. COICA said similar tragedies have occurred periodically in the Ecuadoran Amazon and in other countries in the Amazon Basin provoked by lumber, oil, and mining interests and companies. COICA also blamed the Ecuadoran government for the massacre and said that surveillance of the zone was the responsibility of an army brigade quartered there.

COICA called on the government of President Gutierrez to set up a high-level committee, which would include representatives from the indigenous groups, to investigate the incident and determine those responsible. The group also called for the UN to be involved in the case.

Government response will be difficult

The massacre raised questions about the ability of the government to control the remote Amazon areas as well as questions regarding what course of action authorities should take in response to the killings. One army officer who went to the area after the massacre said, "Our patrol will not interfere with the ancestral customs or punishment procedures of the Huaorani." Anthropologist and Capuchin priest Miguel Angel Cabodevilla, who works in the area, said that "among the Huaorani, ordinary [Western] justice simply does not exist. They have their own justice and their laws. They do not recognize the Constitution, and the state cannot punish where it has never educated."

Chumpi said intervention in such cases is very difficult. "The Tagaeri do not accept contact with the Western world, which means mediation must be between leaders of the ethnic groups involved in the confrontation, with the participation of some other community that is not involved in the conflict."

CONAIE president Leonidas Iza said that a CONAIE commission would investigate the incident and those responsible would be judged by a council of Huaorani elders. But the head of the Corte Superior of Puyo, Eustorio Tandazo, argued that Ecuadoran law should apply in this case. Beyond the question of legal responsibility is the wider issue of government presence in the region.

Giovanna Tassi, director of the environmental press agency Tierra in Puyo, said the attack on the Tagaeri should be a wake-up call regarding logging and oil company activity in lands inhabited by indigenous people in the Amazon, activity which often causes severe environmental and social damages.

An oil pipeline is now being laid along the road that divides the ancestral territory of the Tagaeri in half, while farther north, loggers are cutting down the jungle along the Tiguino river. Cabodevilla said that the "root cause of the conflict is the generalization of violence" in the area, "because it is

a unorganized region with little control." He said, "The state has not regulated colonization, the exploitation of wood, or the oil workers who continually show disrespect toward the Indians. Many conflicts exist, which no one has tried to resolve."

In early June, leaders of CONAIE, ONHAE, and the Confederacion de Nacionalidades Indigenas de la Amazonia Ecuatoriana (CONFENAIE) called for the resignation of Minister of Energy Carlos Arboleda for his "incompetency in the management of the socioeconomic conflicts in the Amazon." They also insisted that the environment minister and regional and local authorities protect and guarantee the collective rights and the traditional customs of the peoples of the Amazon, especially the Huaorani.

Meanwhile, the Huaorani threatened war if the government takes legal action against the Indians.

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