5-2-2008

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Ecuadoran Indigenous Groups Call for Investigation of Alleged Massacre

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Ecuador

Published: 2008-05-02

Indigenous groups called on the Ecuadoran government to investigate an alleged massacre of five tribespeople in Yasuni National Park in February. Authorities looked into the attack, although it took days to arrive at the scene. One official denied that there had been a massacre, and reporting on the incident disappeared in March. Indigenous leaders said that group, composed of members of the Taromenane and Tagaeri tribe, were attacked in a clash with loggers illegally felling trees sometime between Feb. 4 and Feb. 6.

Logger-indigenous conflict

The tribal group, living in self-imposed isolation in the protected area of the Yasuni parklands, supposedly had tried to stop the loggers from cutting trees, said a tribal leader. Correspondents for the BBC say such clashes are common with loggers searching for trees. Valuable trees, such as mahogany and red cedar, are particularly sought after.

Police said in mid-February that they were unable to confirm the reports and did not have the means to reach the remote region, but a group of indigenous leaders were traveling to the area to investigate. "It's difficult to know if there were only five murdered or more. To tell the truth, it is a dangerous trip," Enqueri Nihua Ehuenguime, president of the Organizacion de Nacionalidad Huaorani de la Amazonia Ecuatoriana (ONHAE), told the Associated Press.

The Taromenane and Tagaeri are among several groups native to the 700,000-hectare park, where logging is prohibited. Many of the groups have little or no contact with modern society, making arrests in the conflicts rare. The Yasuni National Park is Ecuador's largest park and a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve. In recent years there have been reports of similar killings sometimes the result of clashes with loggers, other times because of violence between rival tribes (see NotiSur, 2003-06-13 and 2005-08-19).

Inconclusive reporting

International wire services reported the allegations on Feb. 14, but the details of the alleged crime did not become clearer as time went on. ONHAE health director Saul Quimutari had announced on Feb. 13 that assailants had killed as many as 15 Huaoranis on Feb. 10. The number of alleged dead was later downgraded to "five or more."

Some reports claimed that the loggers were Colombian. In the following weeks, there was no conclusive corroboration of the massacre. Huaorani chief Ehuenguime said on Feb. 15 he was convinced that at least five had died because their lances or spears were found in the jungle, in the area of Cononaco, in the Yasuni park near the border with Peru. "To steal the spear of a Huaorani you must kill him," said Ehuenguime, placing responsibility for the deaths on the state and saying Huaorani territory was being destroyed by wood pirates in the absence of effective policing.
Ecuadoran prosecutors said it was necessary "to verify the truthfulness of the report and confirm the existence of the crimes, given the special characteristics of the people in voluntary isolation." They added, "The least prudent thing to result would be advancing judgments about this delicate matter." Internal and External Security Coordination Minister Gustavo Larrea recognized on Feb. 18 that there was a "massacre," although he disputed the double-digit death estimate made by Ehuenguime, saying, "The precise information is that it deals with five [murdered] people."

Larrea acknowledged that "at the moment, the five cadavers have not been recovered. We hope that the investigation that began four days ago will yield results and we might, by later today or tomorrow, have recovered the bodies." But no bodies appeared in February.

A commission of military, police, and environmental officials, along with indigenous-group representatives, only found the spears of the missing five people at the site where the bodies supposedly were found, according to Quito newspaper El Comercio. The paper said the commission made a slow, arduous journey up the Rio Shiripuno to find sites related to the investigation from Feb. 13-16.

On Feb. 21, a short report by United Press International (UPI) said that Environment Minister Marcela Aguinaga eliminated the possibility of a massacre after the commission's investigation, claiming the spears had been abandoned after they had been used for fishing. She did acknowledge signs of illegal logging. Environmental groups accused the government of failing to protect the area, while indigenous groups called for further investigation.

On March 1, Colombia's military launched an attack on an encampment in northern Ecuador, killing about two dozen alleged members of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) and sparking an international crisis (see NotiSur, 2008-03-07). The Colombia-Ecuador crisis drove the Taromenane and Tagaeri massacre completely out of the news in March. The numbers of alleged victims could make a big impact on the tiny tribes. Germany-based Web site www.vulcanusweb.de claimed that only 300 Taromenane and 20-30 Tagaeri survive in the area, living in what the government and press outlets call "voluntary isolation."

Since 1999 the Ecuadoran state has recognized a special territory for peoples living in voluntary isolation. In January 2007, the government of President Rafael Correa decreed a protected zone for that purpose, putting the Environment Ministry in charge of policies dealing with the isolated tribes. The majority of the tribes, according to the Ecuadoran press, do not maintain contact with other peoples in the zone, so they may conserve their ancestral customs, particularly in dress, housing, and nutrition, with the latter based solely on products they grow or hunt. In addition to the pressure from illegal logging, the Yasuni jungle area also holds an estimated 1 billion barrels of crude oil.

In 2007, President Correa asked the international community for at least US$350 million a year for 10 years to compensate Ecuador for income lost by not drilling in the park's Ishpingo-Tiputini-Tambococha (ITT) oil fields.
Protection plan dispatches a few dozen soldiers and police

On February 28, Ecuadoran newspaper El Universo reported that 24 soldiers, 12 police officers, and a technical team named by the Environment Ministry would be put in charge of a plan designed to protect the Taromenane and Tagaeri people. Ministers from the Environment, Defense, and Government (Interior) Ministries signed the plan.

The two-year plan, called the Plan de Medidas Cautelares, sought to prevent unauthorized entry into the protected areas and prevent illegal logging. The ministerial document sought to "conduct monitoring activities and communal integration of indigenous populations linked to the current situation of the people in voluntary isolation."

The plan called for building and equipping a monitoring station along the Rio Shiripuno, along with dispatching members of the armed forces and National Police to protect the tribes. Environment Minister Aguinaga said the plan had a budget of US$700,000. Nonetheless, she added, the government was considering channeling money from the Cuenta Especial de Reactivacion Productiva y Social (Cereps) fund.

Indigenous groups like the Confederacion de Nacionalidades Indigenas del Ecuador (CONAIE) called on the government to better protect native peoples who faced violence after the announcement of the massacre. CONAIE representatives called on lawmakers rewriting the nation's Constitution to protect ancestral indigenous lands.

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