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Did the World Fail Ecuador?

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The Ecuadoran government has decided to allow oil drilling in Yasuní, a national park in the country’s Amazonian region. The decision follows six years of frustrated efforts to secure financial contributions from the international community in exchange for leaving the oil in the ground (NotiSur, Feb. 5, 2010).

The government blames the plan’s failure on a lack of international cooperation. Some social sectors, however, say the government itself is responsible. They plan to defend the intangible area by organizing a popular referendum and by taking legal actions that could force the government to halt oil operations.

"Unfortunately, we must say that the world failed us," President Rafael Correa said while announcing, on national radio and television, the end of the Initiativa Yasuní. "The main factor behind this failure is the world’s great hypocrisy."

Correa said the countries most responsible for causing climate change were the least understanding when it came to the Ecuadoran proposal. "It wasn't charity we were asking for," he said. "It was co-responsibility for climate change."

Ecuador had been seeking US$3.6 billion in exchange for not drilling in Yasuní’s Ishpingo-Tambococha-Tiputini (ITT) oil fields, whose reserves are estimated at 920 million barrels. The government claims the oil is worth more than US$18 billion. Others estimate the value at closer to US$7 billion.

**Did the international community fail?**

By attributing the problem to the international community's lack of cooperation, Correa is glossing over his government’s own share of the responsibility. The initiative failed in part because of government ambivalence. During six years of negotiations, the Correa administration was inconsistent, altering the content of the proposal and shuffling the negotiation team.

The Yasuní Initiative drew on new ideas about environmental law and was consistent with a constitutional philosophy that extends rights to nature, treating it as a living being. The proposal did not follow standard ideas about economics, let alone world market dynamics, but was instead based on a new concept that sees the human, both individually and in community, and the natural worlds as a collective whole. Whatever is damaging to one is necessarily harmful to the other, the theory holds.

"The proposal is philosophical, not economic," Esperanza Martínez, an advisor with the Ministerio de Energía y Minas, said in 2007. The ministry was led, at the time, by Alberto Acosta, who went on to preside over Ecuador's 2007-2008 Asamblea Constituyente but has since distanced himself from the Correa administration (NotiSur, Oct. 12, 2007, and July 4, 2008).
The proposal was well-received by various sectors, including some international governmental groups, which expressed a willingness to support the initiative because it represented a paradigm shift in development models and a break from the standard anthropocentric view of the universe. Later, though, the government adapted the initiative to follow along the lines of the global emissions market, also known as cap and trade.

Ecuador began to negotiate with foreign governments, suggesting they participate by offering compensation for the effects their countries’ fossil-fuel consumption has on the environment and on climate change. The proposal, however, raised various questions that the international community could not, from a purely economic standpoint, answer. How, for example, can governments begin to offer compensation for fossil-fuel consumption that has yet to occur? Carbon credits are linked to the global financial market, while the Initiativa Yasuní currently has no such link.

Along with the concept shifts, the proposal was also weakened by constant personnel changes within the negotiating team, which in the end was led by Ivonne Baki, who has ties to international oil interests. Some of the groups that had originally pledged their support for the initiative grew wary. More concerns were raised in August 2010, at the launch of a UN Development Programme (UNDP)-backed trust fund for the project, when then vice president Lenín Moreno said, "What we need to do now is pass the hat, pass the collection plate around the international community."

Moreno’s statement transformed the original proposal into a standard plea for international cooperation, no different from any other project for which a country might seek outside financing. In the end, Baki was able to collect US$12 million from international donors, while spending US$7.3 million on the effort, according to the Contraloría General del Estado, which is looking into Baki’s spending.

**Isolated peoples at risk**

Another selling point the government used to push the Yasuní Initiative was the need to protect indigenous groups that live in the national park in voluntary isolation; that, at least, was the argument the government and UNDP used to sign their 2010 Yasuní-ITT Trust Fund (NotiSur, Sept. 3, 2010). The protection of peoples in voluntary isolation also figures among the goals of the Plan del Buen Vivir 2013-2017. The development plan, put together by the Secretaría Nacional de Planificación y Desarrollo (SENPLADES), calls on Ecuador to conserve its biodiversity and protect peoples living in voluntary isolation.

Now that President Correa has green-lighted drilling in Yasuní, the government insists there is no evidence proving the Taromenane and Tagaeri indigenous groups actually live in the ITT zone. It dismisses claims by some opposition sectors, which warn that oil production in the in the ITT could lead to the disappearance of those indigenous groups and would, in that case, amount to genocide.

Eduardo Pichilingue, director of the Observatorio de Derechos Colectivos del Ecuador (CDES), said ample evidence suggests that the Taromenane and Tagaeri live throughout the Parque Nacional Yasuní, including in the ITT zone. Pichilingue was part of a team assembled by the Ministerio de Justicia y Derechos Humanos del Ecuador to implement—at the behest of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR)—an indigenous protection scheme known as Plan de Medidas Cautelares para la Protección de los Pueblos Aislados.

"To deny the existence of these peoples is to condemn them to extermination," says Pichilingue.
Opposition referendum

To prevent oil extraction in Yasuní, environmental groups and the indigenous movement have called for a popular referendum. They propose an indefinite ban on drilling in the ITT. The groups have submitted their plebiscite proposal to the Corte Constitucional and are ready to collect the nearly 600,000 signatures needed to put their plan into action.

President Correa, in the meantime, has mobilized more than 30 Amazon-region mayors with the aim of including their own question on the referendum; the mayors argue that ITT oil extraction is needed to help the country’s development and support government policy.

The mobilization of the mayors is taking place at the same time that candidates are being selected for upcoming local elections, scheduled for February 2014. Hoping to be re-elected, the mayors in question are all keen to earn Correa’s endorsement, including those, like Mayor Anita Rivas of El Coca, in Orellana province, who have been critical of the president in the past. Rivas, who recently signed a letter in support of ITT drilling, has changed her tune on the issue and now believes that oil revenue will stay in the Amazon. Rivas is one of several area mayors now supporting drilling who were elected with backing from the Movimiento de Unidad Plurinacional Pachakutik, the political arm of Ecuador’s indigenous movement. They are now hoping to be re-elected with support from Correa’s Alianza País coalition, or from other local movements that have ties with the government.

A referendum may be the only option left for those trying to defend Yasuní. Demonstrations against the president’s decision have not been as effective as expected. Hopes now center on encouraging data from public opinion polls. The firm Perfiles de Opinión, for example, found that public support for leaving the crude in the ground rose from 83.7% in August 2011 to 92.7% this past June.

In an attempt to reverse the tendency, the government launched an aggressive publicity campaign based on promises to reduce poverty and increase investment in the Amazon, where poverty and extreme poverty levels are alarming. Sectors working to protect Parque Nacional Yasuní have been unable to counter the government’s sweeping publicity. Everything seems to be working now in favor of oil extraction.

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