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Victims in Ecuador Add their Voices to Global 'Anti-Chevron Day' Chorus
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Hoping to avoid the kinds of protests that marked past shareholders meetings, US oil giant Chevron decided this year to move its annual general assembly from San Ramon, California, where the corporation is headquartered, to Midland, Texas, a small out-of-the-way city in the state’s western plains.

The plan backfired. Furious about Chevron's attempt to "hide," activist groups from five different countries organized an international day of protest—which took place May 21—to denounce the oil company for its dismal human rights and environmental record.

Delegates from Ecuador, where operations by Texaco (which merged with Chevron in 2001) negatively affected more than 30,000 campesino and indigenous people (NotiSur, May 14, 2010), have made a habit in recent years of traveling to the US to demonstrate at Chevron’s May shareholders meeting. The delegates make the annual trip to explain their legal case against Chevron and to demand that the oil corporation comply with an Ecuadoran judicial ruling—upheld last year by the country’s high court—obliging it to pay more than US$9.5 billion in damages.

The Ecuadorans have been joined at the meetings by activists from other countries, including the US, where environmental groups accuse the company of causing serious pollution problems, most notably in Richmond, California, the site of a major oil refinery. The joint protests have paid off as some shareholders—much to the dismay of John Watson, Chevron’s chief executive officer (CEO) and chairman of the board—have demanded that the Ecuadoran delegates be heard.

Watson was the principal architect behind the Texaco-Chevron merger. Critics say that to ensure that the deal went through he deliberately hid information regarding Ecuador’s legal case against Texaco. This year, Watson again tried to sidestep controversy—not only by moving the shareholder’s meeting to Midland but also by designating himself the assembly’s sole speaker. The CEO did so, presumably, to avoid questions being raised among shareholders who consider themselves duped by the merger, which made Chevron legally and financially responsible for Texaco’s actions in Ecuador.

Watson’s actions triggered an international backlash as activists in more than 30 cities across the globe participated in coordinated demonstrations against the company. Anti-Chevron activities took place in cities as varied and far away from each other as Brussels, Belgium; Toronto, Canada; Perth, Australia; Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; Stockholm, Sweden; Geneva, Switzerland; Caracas, Venezuela; and Mexico City, Mexico. Protests also took place in the Philippines and Nigeria; in cities in the Argentine Patagonia; in Budapest, Hungary; London, England; Paris, France; Berlin, Germany; in Spain’s major cities; in the US city of Chicago; in Quito, Ecuador, where the initiative began; and in Richmond, California, the US city most affected by Chevron’s actions.
Marina’s song

In Quito, activists organized an arts festival. One of the event’s most moving moments occurred when Marina, a woman from the A’i nation (also known as the Cofán nation), an indigenous group that resides in Ecuador’s northern Amazonia region, took the microphone and began to sing in her ancestral tongue. As the song progressed, tears began to fall from the woman’s eyes. After just a few lines, Marina became so overcome with emotion she was unable to finish. "She told her story," said Pablo Fajardo, a lawyer representing the many indigenous and campesino residents who have fought the oil company for so many years.

Marina always begins her songs by describing the happiness of her people at the time when Quenamá, the A’i’s last great shaman and leader, was still alive. Quenamá, who was baptized and given the name Guillermo by Catholic missionaries, lived near the confluence of the Teteyé and Aguaricó Rivers … starting when, nobody knows.

One day a group of men from Texaco arrived. They drilled a pair of wells—Lago Agrio 1 and Lago Agrio 2—and began extracting oil without taking any precautions regarding the toxic waste they dumped into the Teteyé River. Quenamá, upon seeing that his people were becoming ill from drinking the polluted river water, decided to abandon his territory and lead the Cofán into a region now known as Dureno. He swore he would never allow the oil company to enter the area. No outsiders were allowed access to the new Cofán territory.

Later, though, a group of Texaco workers appeared at Quenamá’s home and made him drink tainted alcohol until he died of poisoning. They then seized his wife, Marina, and held her prisoner, taking her from work camp to work camp, where she was forced into prostitution. She wasn’t returned to her community until 20 years later, when she was old and ill; they threw her away like a piece of rubbish. "Once I was used up, they left me," Marina says in her song.

"We’re flesh and blood"

Marina’s story is one of hundreds of sad tales pertaining to Texaco-Chevron’s presence in the Ecuadoran Amazonía, where countless people have died. One of the many victims was Pedro Morales, who succumbed to cancer when he was just 19 years old. Before passing away, he presented himself before Ecuadoran legal authorities, hoping the cancerous tumors in his lung, liver, and leg would help prove Chevron’s culpability.

There is the story, too, of Ramón Quiróz, who died two weeks after carrying out a symbolic sit-in at the offices of Ivonne Baki, a former Ecuadoran ambassador to the US who publicly supported Texaco. Other notable victims were Ángel Toala, Modesta Briones, and Rosana Sisalima, who did of cancer after suffering through tumors and amputations.

These are the stories that motivated Humberto Piaguaje, executive coordinator for the Unión de Afectados Por las Operaciones Petroleras de Texaco (UDAPT), and Robinson Yumbo, a member of the A’i-Cofán nation, to travel last month all the way to Midland, Texas.

"We’ve come here to tell the shareholders and the world that we, the victims of oil-industry pollution, exist. We’re flesh and blood," Piaguaje, standing outside Midland’s Petroleum Museum, where the shareholders meeting took place, said on May 27. "Above all we want to say that the legal
process we have pursued in Ecuador is not done. We’ll keep fighting until [Texaco-Chevron] pays every last cent for the damage it has caused."

The fight against fracking

Six days earlier, as part of the International Anti-Chevron Day initiative, activists in the Argentine cities of Nuequén, Córdoba, and Buenos Aires joined their counterparts in Bucharest, Romania, to protest the use of hydraulic fracturing, or fracking as it is commonly known. Chevron is one of several energy companies using the controversial technique to extract oil from solid deep-rock formations.

The company’s Argentine opponents are particularly concerned about a joint effort by Chevron and Yacimientos Petrolíferos Fiscales (YPF), Argentina’s state energy company, to use fracking to develop nonconventional deposits (NotiSur, Aug. 9, 2013).

To broker its deal with YPF, Chevron convinced Argentine legal authorities to reverse an earlier decision to seize the corporation’s assets in Argentina. The seizure order had been requested by affected people in Ecuador as a way to pressure Chevron into complying with the Ecuadoran court ruling requiring it to pay damages for the environmental catastrophe it caused. The Argentine court that first handled the seizure request approved the measure. Argentina’s Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ), however, later revoked the decision, presumably to facilitate investments by Chevron in Nuequén, a city in the Argentine Patagonia.

Those same groups warn that fracking, if allowed to proceed in Argentina, could eventually spread to other parts of Latin America. The situation is similar to what is taking place in Romania, the starting point for what could eventually be an expansion of the technique into the rest of eastern Europe. Companies involved in fracking are hoping to gain a larger share of the global oil market and thus diminish the influence of Russia and OPEC (the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries), a group that includes Venezuela.

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