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A violent conflict between two groups from the Yaqui tribe has brought attention to the differing views about development within indigenous communities. The confrontation in the Yaqui community of Loma de Bácum in late October resulted in one death, eight injuries, and significant property damage. The factions were clashing over the construction of the Agua Prieta pipeline, which would bring natural gas from the US state of Arizona to Sonora. A portion of the planned pipeline would be constructed in Yaqui territory.

The Mexican government had granted the permit for the pipeline to IENova, a subsidiary of Texas-based Sempra Energy. The pipeline intends to supply gas to the federal electric utility Comisión Federal de Electricidad (CFE).

IENova is one of two companies favored by President Enrique Peña Nieto’s administration in projects involving the construction of natural gas pipelines from the US to Mexico. The Texas-based company and the Canadian firm TransCanada earlier this year received a US$2.16 billion contract to construct a pipeline from south Texas to Tuxpan in Veracruz state. The duct, which will be located underwater for a portion of its route, will also supply natural gas to the CFE.

IENova and TransCanada also received contracts to construct and operate a series of pipelines from southern Texas to the states of Veracruz, Hidalgo, and San Luis Potosí.

The conflict involving 400 members of the Yaqui tribe occurred on Oct. 22, where a group of supporters of the project attacked another faction that was demonstrating against it.

Company ignores moratorium
The Yaqui members from Loma de Bácum had filed and won a moratorium against the construction of the pipeline, which resulted in the temporary suspension of all activity in the area. However, the construction company resumed work despite the moratorium, allegedly with the support of government officials and the Yaqui members from the community of Loma de Guamúchil.

The two sides engaged in a confrontation, using machetes, clubs, rocks, and firearms. The conflict, which reportedly lasted three hours, claimed the life of one person, identified as Cruz Buitimea, a resident of Loma de Bácum, who was shot. Eight others suffered a variety of injuries, and more than a dozen vehicles were burned.

“We learned that a group of Yaqui demonstrators was protesting aggressively against the pipeline,” Sonora public safety secretary Adolfo García Morales told reporters. “We already had two units monitoring the site, and we dispatched another two units as reinforcements.”

However, witnesses told the Associated Press that the state security personnel did nothing to contain the violence.
‘Outside agitators’

Teódulo González, who has the title of commissioner for the defense of land, water, and human rights for the Yaqui nation, blamed the violence on outsiders who incited a group of Yaquis to attack the protesters demonstrating near the area where work on the pipeline was due to begin.

“This was a provocation promoted by the Sonora state government and the private company IENova to end our efforts to defend our territory,” González said.

González and other leaders from Loma de Bácum have accused Loma de Guamúchil leader César Cota Tortola of being “close to the state government” and receiving “millions of pesos” for his support for the project.

Cota Tortola, for his part, accused the faction from Loma de Bácum of starting the conflict, saying he could produce the names of those responsible. At the same time, he criticized authorities for failing to support members of his community. “The federal Army and state authorities were there at the site, but they left us on our own,” he said. “This was not right.”

Mario Luna, a spokesperson for the Yaqui community, explained that disagreements within the tribe have been ongoing, with some communities refusing to allow the pipeline to cross their territory. “They have the agreement from the majority of the towns,” he told reporters. “However, here the decisions are not made by a majority, but rather by consensus.”

The violent clash attracted the attention of the Sonora state government, which designated the state’s chief investigator, Juan de Dios Godoy Rentería, to look into the incident. “His role will be to complement the investigation, prosecutor Rodolfo Montes de Oca said in a statement.

The semi-independent human rights commission (Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos, CNDH) urged Montes de Oca and other officials to take precautionary measures to help protect the Yaqui community against further confrontations.

Sonora Government Secretary Miguel Pompa Corella said Gov. Claudia Pavlovich’s administration had presented a report to the CNDH offering details of the police operations in the aftermath of the clash that included efforts to prevent further violence and to provide the injured parties with immediate medical attention. Corella also alluded to the appointment of Godoy Rentería as the chief investigator of the incident.

The Loma de Bácum community received moral support from the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) and the Congreso Nacional Indígena (CNI).

“We condemn the conflict and discord that are planted and promoted in the communities by the bad governments and their overseers, national and international corporations, who want to take control over the gas, water, and minerals in the Yaqui territory,” said a joint EZLN-CNI statement. “To this end, the powerful sow division as a tool to impose death and destruction in our territories. For them, we are merely a path to more power and more money.” The two indigenous organizations have announced plans to participate directly in the 2018 presidential election (SourceMex, Oct. 19, 2016).
An earlier fight over water rights

The Yaqui communities have opposed other efforts by federal and state governments to impose development projects on their lands. In the spring and summer of 2013, Yaqui demonstrators blocked a major federal highway to protest an aqueduct constructed by the administration of then-Gov. Guillermo Padrés Elías (2009-2015). The aqueduct captured 634 gallons of water per second from the Yaqui River and diverted it through 130 km of pipeline between Presa El Novillo and the state capital of Hermosillo. The Yaquis brought the issue to Mexico’s highest court (Suprema Corte de Justicia de la Nación, SCJN), which ordered the federal government to conduct an environmental impact study (SourceMex, July 31, 2013).

The federal government had been taking a hands-off approach on the controversy, but the Peña Nieto administration was forced to intervene in a more direct way because of the SCJN decision. After months of negotiation, the Peña Nieto administration and Yaqui representatives reached an agreement guaranteeing that the water extracted from the Yaqui River would only be used for human consumption in Hermosillo, and that the administration would respect court rulings spelling out the rights of the region’s Yaqui and campesino (rural workers) communities (SourceMex, Feb. 19, 2014).

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