

Colombia's U'wa Face New Threats

"The U'wa will continue to defend Mother Earth with our voice, our songs and our faith." -- The U'wa



Defending U'wa Life and Territory

Colombia's U'wa indigenous people have fought against oil development on their sacred ancestral lands since the early 1990s. Today, Ecopetrol, Colombia's national oil company, underwritten by the U.S. Export Import Bank, is making plans to pursue oil drilling onto U'wa territory against their steadfast opposition.

Known as "the thinking people", the U'wa are a peaceful indigenous community of roughly 6,200 people who live in the cloud forests of northeastern Colombia, straddling the border with Venezuela. The

U'wa believe that "Oil is the blood of Mother Earth. To take the oil is, for us, worse than killing your own mother. If you kill the earth, then no one will live."

In the 1990's, the U'wa partnered with Colombian and international allies to oppose oil development plans to be carried out by Los Angeles based Occidental Petroleum (OXY). The campaign received extensive media coverage. Activists successfully targeted OXY's top shareholders including Fidelity Investments. In 2002 OXY announced that it was pulling out of the oil project.

Ecopetrol and the Current Threat

Following OXY's departure, rights to the Sirirí and Catleya oil concessions, overlapping U'wa territory, were transferred in full to Ecopetrol. The U'wa are unequivocally opposed to Ecopetrol's exploratory drilling around the Gibraltar platforms – located on the northern boundary of the recognized U'wa Unified Reserve. Since 2007, there has been an influx of heavy machinery, equipment, and oil workers into the area. With the discovery of gas, a processing plant is under construction at Gibraltar, in addition to a gas pipeline running westward toward Bucaramanga.

Ecopetrol has in the past expressed its intention to carry out exploration and drilling within the legally recognized U'wa Unified Reserve. Maps taken from Ecopetrol's community presentations illustrate the company's plans for seismic testing in the heart of the U'wa territory. This expansion is of great concern and violates prior commitments to the U'wa people.

Ecopetrol argues that the Gibraltar wells are found outside of U'wa territory as legally recognized by the Colombian state, and therefore op-



Taken from Ecopetrol's website, this map illustrates the northern border of the U'wa reserve. Within the red oval it shows the "Area of Future Drilling", illustrating Ecopetrol's intention of drilling within the boundaries of the reserve.

erations there do not require prior consultation with indigenous authorities. In fact, the Gibraltar wells fall within U'wa traditional ancestral lands, which the U'wa consider to be their territory. The Gibraltar drill site contains several sacred cultural sites and was purchased by the U'wa Association in the late 1990's as part of their program to recuperate their ancestral territory. It was later forcibly expropriated. Also, given the close proximity of the Gibraltar wells to the U'wa community, oil operations there have direct social and environmental impacts on the communities. These can include health impacts from pollution, social conflict between outside workers and local indigenous peoples, and most notably oil installations attract violence and armed conflict.

U'wa Territory in the Crosshairs

In addition Ecopetrol's gas project and likely expansion of oil and gas exploration in and around the U'wa reserve, there are a number of other

threats to U'wa exercise of control within their own territory.

- **Coal mining:** Friends of the Earth Colombia is monitoring several new mining concessions within U'wa territory, made without any consultation with the U'wa leadership. Coal is an increasingly important part of the Colombian economy. In 2009, roughly 80% of U.S. coal imports came from Colombia

- **Bi-national road:** There is a proposal to build a road to connect Colombia with Venezuela, cutting right through the heart of the U'wa reserve. Such a road would have obvious military and economic uses, while posing a serious threat to U'wa culture and environment. The negative social and environmental impacts of large roads on local communities are well documented, while the promised benefits rarely materialize.

- **El Cocuy National Park:** A large portion of the U'wa territory is covered by the Cocuy National Park administered by state entities, often conflict with the rights of local indigenous communities. The Government has proposed an expansion of tourism facilities into mountain peaks that are so sacred to the U'wa that they restrict even their own people's access.

- **Militarization:** U'wa have a long history of opposition to any armed presence in their territory, based on inherently nonviolent cultural values. Part of their resistance to

resource extraction is their understanding of the Colombian pattern in which rural economic bonanzas inexorably attract armed groups. Recent years have seen significant movements of illegal armed groups through U'wa territory and the militarization carried out by the Colombia armed forces.

Join the U'wa Campaign

The U'wa, who view themselves as the guardians of the earth and all species therein, continue to fight nonviolently in defense of their sacred forests, rivers, mountains and their culture. Oil and gas exploitation, militarization, coal mining and other harmful industrial projects continue to present a real threat to the U'wa people and their environment. The ability of the U'wa to thwart these threats will depend on the support they receive from allies like you.

Please sign up for updates, donate to the U'wa Defense Project, and take action at www.amazonwatch.org.

About the U'wa Defense Project: Amazon Watch has been a key ally of the U'wa since the international campaign started in the mid 1990's. The U'wa Defense Project was founded in 1999, following the tragic killing of three U.S. indigenous rights activists during a visit to U'wa territory. In 2006 the UDP was merged with Amazon Watch and today continues as one of the organization's flagship campaigns.

Amazon Watch works to protect the rainforest and advance the rights of indigenous peoples in the Amazon Basin

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