Ecuadorian indigenous peoples resist oil drilling in the Amazon, 1989-1994

January 1989 to: September 1994

Country: Ecuador

Location City/State/Province: Ecuadorian Amazon ("El Oriente")

Goals:
The Sarayacu Accord "called on the government to end colonization and homesteading in the rainforest, resolve disputed land claims, place a 15-year moratorium on petroleum exploration, grant indigenous territories semi-autonomous political status, and impose a levy on oil production whose proceeds would go to indigenous communities. The accord also [called for] a so-called Bilateral Commission, composed of representatives from indigenous organizations and the Ecuadorian government, to report on the status of native communities." (Mendex et al)

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 048. Protest meetings
- 199. Nonviolent confinement

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 029. Symbolic reclamations
- 171. Nonviolent interjection
- 173. Nonviolent occupation

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support

Methods in 4th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 013. Deputations
- 015. Group lobbying
Methods in 5th segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support

Methods in 6th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 013. Deputations
- 026. Paint as protest
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 162. Sit-in
- 172. Nonviolent obstruction

Classifications

Classification:
Defense

Cluster:
Economic Justice
Environment
National/Ethnic Identity

Group characterization:

- Native activists from Pastaza province
- Quichua peoples

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:
Héctor Villamil, the president of OPIP, was a veteran of indeginous politics. Leonardo Viteri directed OPIP’s research institute. These two represented OPIP in the various negotiations with the Arlington Richmond Company (ARCO), the government and other parties.

Partners:
Not known

External allies:
The exact degree of involvement of each of the following groups is ambiguous, and frequently varies from source to source.

Rainforest Action Network, OXFAM America, and the Seventh Generation Fund helped arrange meetings between OPIP and ARCO representatives and internationally publicized and fundraised for the campaign.

The Coordinator of Indigenous Organizations in the Amazon Basin, a trans-Amazonian group, and Acción Ecologica, an Ecuadorian environmental association, assisted with networking and consulting.

**Involvement of social elites:**
Not known

### Joining/exiting order of social groups

**Groups in 1st Segment:**

**Groups in 2nd Segment:**

- Accion Ecologica

**Groups in 3rd Segment:**

- Rainforest Action Network (RAN)

**Groups in 4th Segment:**

- Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE)
- Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of the Ecuadorian Amazon (CONFENIAE)

**Groups in 5th Segment:**

**Groups in 6th Segment:**

- Coordinator of Indigenous Organizations in the Amazon Basin (COICA)
- OXFAM America
- Seventh Generation Fund

**Segment Length:** Approximately 11.5 months

### Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

**Opponents:**
Arlington Richmond Company (ARCO); government of Ecuador

**Nonviolent responses of opponent:**
Not known

**Campaigner violence:**
Not known

**Repressive Violence:**
In January, 1994, members of the Intercommunitarian Directive of Independent Communities of Pastaza (DICIP), a group subsidized heavily by ARCO, broke into the home of OPIP supporters in Villano and threatened violence before destroying property.
In June 1988, the Arlington Richmond Company (ARCO) acquired rights to explore and exploit petroleum resources in an area of Pastaza province, Ecuador, known as Block 10. Located in the Amazon rainforest in eastern Ecuador (“El Oriente”), Pastaza was barely developed at the time. No roads reached Block 10—the small villages in the area were only accessible via helicopter, small airplane, or a multi-day jungle trek. To the Organization of Indigenous Peoples of Pastaza (OPIP), which represented 15,000 locals, mostly of the Quichua nation, ARCO’s acquisition seemed like a dangerous intrusion. Foreign oil companies had already exploited the provinces of Napo and Sucumbíos, north of Pastaza, and the devastation to the rainforest was inescapable. Health problems among local communities increased as drinking water quality plummeted. The Block 10 concession also symbolized to OPIP the federal government’s disregard for indigenous rights. Although native peoples had lived and maintained the forest for generations, the government did not acknowledge them as owners of the land, and freely sold or gave away plots as it saw fit.

ARCO immediately began conducting seismic tests to determine the amount of subterranean oil in Block 10. The OPIP campaign began in early 1989 when community members from Sarayacu confiscated the equipment of a French sub-contractor investigating the area. After several months of inactivity, an ARCO field manager offered the community $5,000 dollars in exchange for their yielding cooperation, which they rejected. Days later, a delegation composed of government officials and representatives from ARCO and the state oil company flew their helicopter into Sarayacu to resolve the deadlock. Upon the delegation’s arrival, OPIP members confiscated the helicopter keys, felled trees across the local airstrip and presented the delegation with a list of demands. Indigenous peoples from around Pastaza walked for days to participate in the “Sarayacu assembly” with the semi-captive officials. OPIP insisted the officials were free to leave if they wanted—by foot (the nearest road was four days away). After twelve days in Sarayacu, the officials signed the Sarayacu Accord, a sweeping realization OPIP’s demands. It granted communal land ownership and semi-autonomous status to all native territories in Pastaza, pronounced a tax on oil production for the benefit of indigenous peoples, created a commission to give indigenous peoples a voice in government, and imposed a 15-year moratorium on further oil exploration. Within months, however, the government reneged on the accord, claiming that its representatives had been coerced.

When ARCO resumed exploratory activity in 1990, it did so in Moretecocha, chosen for the amenability of the locals to oil, or at least oil money. OPIP maintained, however, that all indigenous territories were communal, and therefore the Moretecocha residents did not have the right to unilaterally permit oil exploitation on communal land. OPIP members planted gardens and built houses at the proposed well site, which were repeatedly torn down by ARCO-employed indigenous men. In response to the obstruction, and at ARCO’s behest, the government deeded the land specifically to the Moretecocha community and sent military forces to guard the well site. Indigenous peoples, including OPIP, had been struggling and failing for years to acquire legal titles to their land, but Moretecocha accomplished this simply by acceding to ARCO’s demands. This strategy of granting
legal land titles in exchange for cooperation proved so successful in winning the local community that ARCO employed it again at Pandanuque and Santa Cecilia in 1991. OP\textsuperscript{I}P rejected these arrangements, insisting that all Quichua peoples must equally own all Quichua land, including Block 10.

At this time, OP\textsuperscript{I}P received assistance from U.S.-based Rainforest Action Network (RAN). RAN publicized the cause in the United States, raised funds, and persuaded ARCO to submit to an environmental impact assessment conducted by researchers at the University of California at Berkeley. The Berkeley team found evidence of damage to wildlife in ARCO’s exploratory areas, findings that ARCO disputed.

Having been prevented by the military from acting directly at well sites, OP\textsuperscript{I}P decided to take the campaign directly to the government in Quito. Working in conjunction with the national Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE) and the regional Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of the Ecuadorian Amazon (CONFENIAE), OP\textsuperscript{I}P organized a 250-kilometer march from the Amazon lowlands to the Andean capital. 5,000 indigenous marchers arrived in Quito in April 1992. 100 of them met with presidential representatives and requested land titles and legal control over the entire indigenous territory in Pastaza. In response, the government granted 55% of the requested ancestral territory, but divided it up into nineteen arbitrary land blocks with no regard to local social divisions or even geographic features. The government also limited the concession to surface rights, maintaining control over subsurface deposits, including oil. Although the legalization of indigenous, communal ownership of the land was still historic, natives had no way of preventing the exploitation of the land that was nominally theirs.

ARCO meanwhile proceeded with its strategy of dividing indigenous peoples for its benefit. In July 1993, it convinced a group of 100 of the most impoverished people in the area to break off from OP\textsuperscript{I}P and form the Intercommunitarian Directive of the Independent Communities of Pastaza (DICIP). DICIP members denied the necessity of sharing petroleum gains with the entire indigenous community; instead, it chose to cooperate with ARCO for their exclusive benefit. ARCO repeatedly denied bankrolling DICIP even as its representatives bailed DICIP members out of jail and transparently provided the group with a shiny new office. In subsequent negotiations, ARCO placed OP\textsuperscript{I}P and DICIP on equal footing in the name of a “democratic plurality” of local organizations. This was a severe insult to OP\textsuperscript{I}P, which had fifteen more years of experience and whose members outnumbered DICIP by a factor of 100. Thus, ARCO manufactured dissent among the indigenous population, allowing itself to appear as the heroic mediator between two conflicting sides.

Frustrated by stalled negotiations, OP\textsuperscript{I}P staged another march in December 1993, this one in reverse of the Quito march. Representatives from indigenous communities marched through the jungle into Villano, symbolizing the Spanish push into the Amazon hundreds of years before. Not coincidentally, Villano was the home of an exploratory oil well, a military installation, and DICIP headquarters. At Villano, OP\textsuperscript{I}P hosted a summit to discuss its next move, attended by international allies Oxfam America and the Coordinator of Indigenous Organizations in the Amazon Basin (COICA), as well as the Ecuadorian environmental group and long-time ally Acción Ecológica. OP\textsuperscript{I}P leaders Héctor Villamil and Leonardo Viteri publically declared that the tin roofs and basketball courts installed by ARCO were not true signs of progress, but “trinkets” to buy off DICIP members and divide the indigenous community. They reiterated that OP\textsuperscript{I}P was not opposed to oil development per se, only reckless development by multinational corporations at the expense of local peoples and the environment. After three days of debate, the “Villano Assembly” issued a statement imploring that ARCO “lessen and avoid the social, cultural, and environmental impact of its project on native communities.” This was a significant downgrading of the goals set in Sarayacu.

Less than a month after the Villano Assembly, members of OP\textsuperscript{I}P, CONAIE, CONFENIAE and Acción Ecológica occupied the Ministry of Energy and Mines in Quito. Their action, on January 24, 1994, coincided with the scheduled opening of a corporate auction for new oil concessions in El Oriente. Twenty activists occupied the building as 150 more formed a human blockade outside to halt all traffic in and out of the ministry. After five hours, the Minister of Energy agreed to meet with OP\textsuperscript{I}P on the following day. In this meeting, the minister and an ARCO lawyer repeatedly deflected indigenous concerns and did not attempt to reach an agreement.

However, the process of conciliation received an unexpected boost in March 1994, when OP\textsuperscript{I}P leaders Villamil and Viteri met
with ARCO executives in Plano, Texas, as part of a tour funded by RAN, OXFAM and the Seventh Generation Fund. At this point, following five years of actions and negotiations but little tangible progress, Villamil and Viteri were aware of the necessity of providing material benefits to their supporters in order to remain relevant. This condition made them more willing to settle for small gains. OPIP agreed to convene a united indigenous front with DICIP and another group, the Association of Evangelical Indigenous Peoples of Pastaza (AIEPRA), and ARCO agreed to move toward the establishment of a regulatory Environmental Technical Committee (ETC) with indigenous representation.

After several intermediary negotiating sessions, the ETC held its widely publicized first meeting on September 24, 1994. From the beginning, the ETC was fraught with tension, both between OPIP and DICIP, the latter of which withdrew from and reentered the indigenous front several times, and between the indigenous front and ARCO. ARCO immediately hedged on several of its prior promises, including the establishment of a fund to benefit local communities in Pastaza. Despite these obstacles, the Environmental Technical Committee worked over the next two and a half years to create a sustainable development plan suitable to all parties.

In the end, the creation of the ETC was accepted by all parties, but it was a far cry from the lofty goals espoused by OPIP back in 1989. ARCO was more than happy to institutionalize dissent rather than having to deal with activists physically shutting down its wells. ARCO also moved to remove social issues from the ETC’s purview through the creation of a Good Neighbors Forum, essentially an extension of the previous policy of buying out the locals in exchange for cooperation. Nevertheless, OPIP leaders Villamil and Viteri claim that the establishment of the ETC was a victory, because it afforded indigenous peoples a voice in a process that formerly excluded them.

The first exportable oil in Pastaza flowed from a Villano well in 1999. Indigenous peoples received less than 1% of the profit.

**Research Notes**

**Sources:**


**Additional Notes:**
In June 1994, OPIP began another campaign to protect indigenous rights, in which it blockaded all major roads and railways in the country for ten days to protest neoliberal agrarian legislation. For more information on this campaign, research "Movilización por la Vida."

ARCO’s oil wells in Pastaza became operational on an exportable scale in 1999. The former ARCO is owned today by British Petroleum.