



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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U'wa people block Occidental Petroleum (Colombia), 1995-2001

Late

1995

to: May

2001

Country: Colombia

Location Description: *Samore block (U'wa territory), Colombian Andes*

Goals:

The goal of the U'wa people was to keep Occidental Oil from drilling within and around their reservation and ancestral homeland; "We are demanding that the Colombian government permanently suspend the oil exploration license of Occidental Petroleum and its associate Shell Oil on our traditional lands," –Roberto Cobaría, President of the Traditional U'wa Authority

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 048. Protest meetings

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 013. Deputations
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 050. Teach-ins › speaking tours

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 010. Newspapers and journals › Internet 'Action Alerts'
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 050. Teach-ins › speaking tours

Methods in 4th segment:

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 050. Teach-ins › speaking tours

Methods in 5th segment:

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 050. Teach-ins › speaking tours
- 099. Peasant strike
- 173. Nonviolent occupation

Methods in 6th segment:

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 172. Nonviolent obstruction

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 010. Newspapers and journals › Internet 'Action Alerts'

Notes on Methods:

Declarations were made largely through the Internet

Classifications

Classification:

Defense

Cluster:

Environment

National/Ethnic Identity

Group characterization:

- The U'wa people

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Werhayas, or spiritual leaders of the U'wa; Roberto Cobaria, President of the Traditional U'wa Authority

Partners:

students; domestic and international solidarity activists; farmers from Sarare; Colombian peasants

External allies:

U'wa Senator Lorenzo Muelas; Coalition for Amazonian Peoples and Their Environment; Colombian environmental NGOs; Ombudsman's Office of Colombia (Defensoría del Pueblo); Amazon Coalition (U.S.); The Amazon Alliance; Amazon Watch; the Action Resource Center (ARC); Sol Communications; the Rainforest Action Network (RAN); the U'wa Defense Project (later known as the U'wa Defense Working Group) (U.S); other international NGOs; Environmental and human rights activists located all over the world

Involvement of social elites:

Not Known

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- U'wa Senator Lorenzo Muelas

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- Amazon Coalition (U.S.)
- Coalition for Amazonian Peoples and Their Environment
- Ombudsman's Office of Colombia (Defensoría del Pueblo)
- Students
- U'Wa Defense Project

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

- Colombian peasants
- farmers from Sarare

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Additional notes on joining/exiting order:

Timing not known for other actors in the transnational advocacy network

Segment Length: *Approximately 11 months*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Occidental Petroleum (Oxy); Colombia's Ministry of Mines and Energy and the Ministry of the Environment

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not known

Campaigner violence:

Not known

Repressive Violence:

Robert Cobaria recounted an incident where he was abducted and beaten, his abductors threatening his life, if he didn't sign an 'authorization agreement' regarding oil development. It is unclear who was responsible for the threat. During the occupation of Gibraltar I, Colombian police attacked protesters with tear gas and pushed some U'wa into a nearby river. Three children died in the assault. Many adults were injured and some went missing.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

5 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

Oxy eventually withdrew from the U'wa's land. They claimed it was because they failed to find oil; however, the fact that subsequent test wells were not drilled (standard industry practice) indicates other factors might have been at play. While the struggle against Oxy might have proved successful, it is unclear how the campaign affected the broader struggle for U'wa

rights and sovereignty. Transnational allies deemed the campaign a success and directed their energy to other campaigns. The network that had built over the last years quickly diminished. Within a year of Oxy's departure, Colombia's own Ecopetrol would begin similar practices.

U'wa gained many allies in the international environmental and NGO community, who staged numerous solidarity actions and awareness campaigns in support of the U'wa struggle. As with many cases of transnational advocacy, further study should investigate the effectiveness of solidarity campaigns and which organizations were more effective than others at really engaging Oxy and the Colombia government on U'wa's terms.

The U'wa people have practiced their traditional culture in the Northeast forests of the Colombian Andes since time immemorial. At the end of the 20th century, there were up to 5,000 people in U'wa communities.

In the early 1990's Occidental Petroleum (Oxy), a United States based corporation started negotiations with the Colombian government for oil exploration rights on U'wa traditional lands. Colombia had recently reformed its Constitution to guarantee indigenous administration of indigenous territories and land ownership. However, by 1995, the government (largely the Ministry of Mines and Energy and the Ministry of the Environment) granted Occidental of Colombia, a subsidiary of Oxy, a license for oil exploration on the Samore block, a significant traditional land for the U'wa.

For the U'wa, the land is sacred, and oil is the blood of Mother Earth. The planned oil development was an affront to their culture and indigenous sovereignty. The U'wa first sought legal council; government agencies were supposed to have U'wa consent before issuing such licenses. In October 1995, a tribunal ruled in favor of the U'wa, but the Supreme Court overturned the decision. Legal decisions would henceforth be riddled with contradiction: while there were legal avenues that should have protected the U'wa, reports claim that the proposed oil development would earn the Colombian government up to \$14 billion in revenues.

In response, the Werhayas, or spiritual leaders of the U'wa, along with other U'wa, threatened to commit suicide in protest. The threat echoed the history of the U'wa; it is told that a community of U'wa peoples jumped to their death from a local cliff in resistance to Spanish colonization in the 17th century. The modern U'wa threatened to walk en masse off the same cliff.

While legal disputes were being settled, a national and transnational network of allies and supporters grew. In August 1996, U'wa Senator Lorenzo Muelas organized a forum attended by Colombians, international journalists, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Soon after, coalitions were formed between the U'wa and Northern environmental NGOs, including the Coalition for Amazonian Peoples and Their Environment. 'Action alerts' were posted on the Internet, gaining more supporters.

While international networks were being activated, the U'wa sought connections with Colombian environmental NGOs. For example, at the National Forum on the Environment at Guaduas in January 1997 the U'wa shared their stories and formed more connections.

In the spring of 1997, the Ombudsman's Office of Colombia (Defensoría del Pueblo) filed a formal suit on behalf of the U'wa. The case made it to the highest authority Constitutional Court, where it was ruled that U'wa rights had been violated. However, the Council of State approved Oxy's oil license and no redresses were made.

Just before the Council of State's ruling, almost 3,000 students, environmentalists, U'wa, and others marched to the Ministry of the Environment in Bogotá to support the U'wa in April 1997.

In May 1997, the Amazon Coalition, a US based environmental NGO, invited U'wa and National Indigenous Organization of Colombia (ONIC) leaders on a speaking tour in the US. The Amazon Alliance, Amazon Watch, the Action Resource Center (ARC), Sol Communications, and the Rainforest Action Network (RAN) supported this first trip as well. After the first visit to the states, supporters and allies increased tremendously. They would continue tours until 2000 in the US and Europe.

On May 28, U'wa representatives from different communities met with officials from Oxy and government offices to discuss oil development. U'wa had requested a three-day conflict resolution, but the government cancelled the larger schedule of talks. In the meeting, there were conflicts regarding opinions of territorial demarcation, and whether U'wa had been (and was being) properly consulted in the process.

The conflicts seemed to bolster the coalition between U'wa and growing international advocacy network. The network grew quickly and played a major part in the U'wa story. However, many of the involved organizations started solidarity campaigns of their own and the details can't be recalled here in full. For example, a US-based environmental NGO coalition called the U'wa Defense Project (later known as the U'wa Defense Working Group) was established in June 1997. Member organizations included RAN, Project Underground, the Colombian Human Rights Commission, the Action Resource Center, the Earth Trust Foundation, the Center for Justice and International Law, Sol Communications, and the Earthjustice Legal Defense Fund. They organized negative publicity campaigns, helped U'wa become Goldman Environmental Prize awardees in 1998, and rallied against Al Gore during his 2000 campaign for his ties with Oxy. They held protest demonstrations at Oxy shareholder meetings and targeted Oxy's main investor, Fidelity Investments. Demonstrations and direct actions were organized in over 75 locations in the US, Japan and the UK. Latin American NGOs helped coordinate meetings between U'wa and other indigenous groups affected by Oxy. European groups such as the Italian Green Party and London's Reclaim the Streets also showed solidarity.

In June 1997, amid growing international pressure, the Colombian government requested an intervention of the Organization of American States (OAS) to study the conflict and make recommendations. The findings were published several months later. The report urged for the oil company to immediately suspend oil exploration activities in the Samore block in order to establish more legitimate consultation processes with the U'wa.

The report was viewed as a setback for Oxy. However, it became known that Oxy was looking into alternative oil sites, namely, the Gibraltar I site, which was virtually on U'wa land.

In October 1997, U'wa leader Robert Cobarria and founder of the U'wa Defense Project Terence Freitas joined others in a protest demonstration in Los Angeles. Later that month, at a press conference, Robert Cobarria recounted an incident where he was abducted and beaten, his abductors threatening his life, if he didn't sign an 'authorization agreement' regarding oil development.

In January 1998, RAN released an 'action alert' on the Internet targeting Shell for its financial participation in oil development on U'wa land. After receiving thousands of letters, and hoping to avoid bad publicity, Shell withdrew from the Samore project in February.

One year later, three US environmentalist coalition members were killed by FARC, the largest guerrilla group in Colombia, while organizing with U'wa.

In August 1999, Colombia granted U'wa a title for a unified reservation, something the U'wa had advocated for independently of the Oxy ordeal. The title conspicuously excluded the latest area where drilling was proposed.

In mid-November 1999, over 200 U'wa and farmers from Sarare occupied the Gibraltar I drill site. Soon after, Colombian police attacked protesters with tear gas and pushed some U'wa into a nearby river. Three children died in the assault. Many adults were injured and some went missing. In January 2000, all occupiers were removed by thousands of Colombian troops.

Soon after being evicted from the Gibraltar I site, U'wa called three peasant strikes, which brought the local economy to a halt and stalled communication and transportation.

In May 2000, a U'wa petition challenging Oxy's oil license was rejected. A renewed direct action campaign began, with actions conducted by community members (details unknown). Peasants from Arauca blocked roads and U'wa set up road blockades to prevent trucks from reaching the Oxy drill site.

At the May 2001 shareholders meeting, Oxy announced that it would abandon all plans to drill in the region. They claimed the

reason was because they had not found sufficient oil. However, the fact that subsequent test wells were not drilled (standard industry practice) indicates other factors might have been at play.

Transnational allies deemed the campaign a success and directed their energy to other campaigns. The network that had been built over the last years quickly diminished. U'wa reaction to the announcement was more measured. They suspended the direct action campaign, but were suspicious of the long-term protection of their land. The U'wa were wise in their suspicion; as early as October 2002, oil machinery appeared again on U'wa territory, this time under the authority of Ecopetrol, the Colombian state oil company, and heavy military protection. The U'wa is still engaged in struggle in defense of their land from the fossil fuel industry.

Research Notes

Influences:

The U'wa were influenced by the alleged mass-suicide of many of their people centuries earlier in opposition to the Spanish colonization. (1)

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Additional Notes:

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Zein Nakhoda, 14/05/2011

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