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Press Contacts:

In Peru: FECONACO office (Spanish only): 51.65.26.72.87

In the US: AMAZON WATCH: Maria Ramos: 202.785.3962; Simeon Tegel: 415.487.9600

Achuar Nation Wins Landmark Agreement to Stop Toxic Contamination of Rainforest Homelands After 14-day Blockade

Tropical Rainforest and Native Communities May Never Fully Heal From Three Decades of Carcinogenic Dumping

Online Interviews with Achuar Leaders

Washington D.C. – The Achuar nation today celebrated a historic indigenous triumph over the oil industry after blockading Peru's largest oil facility in protest over the devastating toxic contamination of their Amazon rainforest homelands.

More than 800 determined Achuar elders, women and children joined the peaceful blockade, which lasted nearly two weeks, shutting down power to most of the region's oil production facilities and blocking airport, river and road access to the region. The protest came after two years of failed talks with Peruvian government officials over the daily discharge of more than one million barrels of "formation waters," an untreated toxic by-product of the oil drilling process, directly into the rainforest.

The dumping has been going on for three decades and the Achuar have unsafe and illegal levels of a range of toxins in their bodies, including lead and cadmium, as a result. It has also poisoned local waterways to the point where the fish and game populations on which the Achuar depend for survival are no longer fit for human consumption.

Initially, the Peruvian government sent in more than 200 members of the national police with orders to disperse the peaceful demonstrators and restore oil production. However, the Achuar convinced the police to refrain from using force and to respect their picket. After a weekend of intense negotiations, both the government and the oil company currently running the concession, Argentina-based Pluspetrol, gave in to nearly all the Achuar demands. The written agreement they signed yesterday includes promises to:

- Re-inject 100 percent of the formation waters back into the ground within 12 months in concession "1AB." Pluspetrol had originally committed to re-injecting 15 percent by 2010;
- 50 percent re-injection of formation waters in the neighboring block "8" by December 2007 and the rest by December 2008;
- Construction of a new hospital and a multi-million dollar health budget for the Achuar;

One Hallidie Plaza Suite 402 SAN FRANCISCO CA 94102
Tel: 415.487.9600 Fax: 415.487.9601

amazon@amazonwatch.org
www.amazonwatch.org

P.O. Box 3421 MALIBU CA 90265
Tel: 310.456.9158 Fax: 310.456.0388



- Five percent of all oil royalties to the Peruvian state of Loreto to be dedicated to Achuar community development, including food production, health and education;
- One year of emergency food supply for affected communities given the river fish and game are highly contaminated; and
- The acknowledgement of a unilateral declaration by the Achuar that they oppose new oil concessions in their territories and request cancellation of contracts for blocks 104 and 106.

“We have achieved 98% of our demands, and won recognition of our rights” said Andres Sandi, President of FECONACO, the representative organization of the Achuar people of the Corrientes River. “This victory is the result of the strength of our people who came together and pressured hard and would not abandon our demands.”

The Achuar have now called off the blockade, which had closed down the rainforest oil facility and shut down 50 percent of Peru’s oil production. However, Achuar communities continue to be threatened by the oil industry. There are vast areas of the rainforest that require major clean up from 35 years of negligent oil extraction. Additionally, in neighboring areas, ConocoPhillips, Occidental Petroleum (Oxy), and Petrolifera currently own drilling rights to a vast, intact area of tropical rainforest also inhabited by the Achuar, who adamantly oppose any drilling on their territories. Unless both ConocoPhillips and Oxy commit to respect the Achuar’s stated desires, there are likely to be more confrontations.

“This is a major victory and a glorious day for indigenous peoples’ rights, not only in Peru but around the world,” said Lily la Torre Lopez, of the Lima-based Racimos de Ugurahui and who acts as attorney to the Achuar, speaking to Amazon Watch from a satellite phone from the Achuar territory. “This victory represents the work of a proud and determined people who decided to risk all to rescue the future of their children.”

Atossa Soltani, of Amazon Watch, added: “The Achuar had to take high-stakes measures to force both Pluspetrol and the Peruvian state to end the archaic practice of dumping of oil waste into the rainforest where thousands live, fish, and bathe in local waters. The oil industry’s days of ‘pollute and run’ are numbered.”

In the U.S. and other industrialized countries, the standard industry procedure for more than half-a-century has been to re-inject all formation waters deep back into the ground precisely to prevent the kind of environmental and public health crisis currently taking place among the Achuar communities. Oil companies operating in the Amazon and other areas of developing nations have, however, often chosen to save money by dumping the formation waters.

In the Achuar lands, the dumping began in the 1970s when the concession was designed, constructed and run by Oxy, which eventually handed its facilities to Pluspetrol which continues to operate in the same out dated manner. The agreement does not fully address the clean up needed of historic contamination since the 1970’s. However it is a giant step forward in preventing future contamination.

For background on the Achuar’s struggle to protect their lands and communities, visit www.amazonwatch.org.

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