

 Listen to Article |  Share


Ecuador's oil-waste victims share solidarity

naomi king

By NAOMI KING

702 words

9 July 2010

23:06

[Associated Press Newswires](#)

APRS

English

(c) 2010. The Associated Press. All Rights Reserved.

DULAC, La. (AP) - Luis Yanza said he traveled nearly half way around the world this week only to find that oil companies use the same toxic practices and treat indigenous people in the United States the same as in Ecuador.

The Ecuadorean thought he would just see an oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. Instead, he says, he saw a pattern of corporate abuse, pipeline canals dug through marshlands and oil waste pits next to homes like those in the Grand Bois community.

"If oil companies have been successful in globalizing their bad practices all to make a profit ... why can't we all unite to defend our land, to defend our rights?" said Yanza, a coordinator for the Amazon Defense Front, through a translator.

Yanza and three other Ecuadoreans offered their solidarity to more than 50 local residents and members of the United Houma Nation and the Plaquemines Parish-based Atakapa-Ishak Tribe at the Knights of Columbus Hall in Dulac on July 1.

The South American visitors, along with organizers from Amazon Watch and the Rainforest Action Network, toured local bayous and shared their cautionary tales of what has been a nearly two-decade fight against Texaco, which was acquired by [Chevron](#) in 2001.

They said [Chevron](#) has tried to discredit their leaders and launched public-relations campaigns to gloss over the health and environmental impacts. They warned of cancer and illnesses that won't be seen for years to come. But, they also said, affected communities have the power to demand accountability and compensation and they should capitalize on the media coverage of the ongoing oil spill in the Gulf. It took decades for the remote Ecuadorean communities to draw the world's attention to [Chevron's](#) pollution of the rainforest.

Since the 1960s, [Texaco-Chevron](#) has drilled in a northern region of Ecuador's Amazon rainforest and dumped 18.5 billion gallons of toxic waste sludge and wastewater into nearby streams and rivers, which local people depend on for drinking, bathing, and fishing, according to the Rainforest Action Network's website.

The company dug over 900 open air and unlined waste pits that continue to seep toxins into the ground and water. Hundreds of families have seen exposure-related diseases, and activists say the polluted area is the size of Rhode Island.

The company has yet to clean up the waters or land, compensate the people for their damages or address their health problems, said Humberto Piaguaje, a leader in the Secoya tribe. No one told the people how the waste would affect them, he said. Some people even used the sludge, unknowingly, as coating on wooden house columns to prevent deterioration, he said. Traditional territories were diminished because of the contamination and people were forced to move because they could not longer live off the land, Piaguaje said.

Seventeen years ago, a united front of five indigenous groups and farmer communities -- roughly 30,000 people -- filed a class-action lawsuit that they continue to fight today in an Ecuadorean court. Damages have been estimated at \$27.3 billion.

Also in the audience were visitors from British Columbia in Canada who are fighting a proposed pipeline, called Northern Gateway, and oil tanker traffic along the coast so their communities won't have the same disasters seen in Ecuador and the Gulf of Mexico.

"We're people of the ocean and people of the land, and we depend on it the same way you do," said Art Sterritt, executive director of Coastal First Nations.

Ten years ago, the group reached out to the environmental community and later the forestry and mining industries to rally support around creating a conservation-based economy and keeping oil companies from abusing land and resources, Sterritt said.

Though the oil-and-gas industry employs many residents in southeast Louisiana, locals said, the price for oil is too high for coastal communities.

"It does not give them a right to destroy a culture, to destroy a people, to destroy a way of life," said Brenda Dardar-Robichaux, former principal chief of the United Houma Nation.

Information from: The Courier, <http://www.houmatoday.com>

9

Press Association, Inc.

Document APRS000020100710e67a000bw

