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Peru ignores UN calls to suspend Amazon gas expansion



Workers and specialists check a hole created by a pipeline explosion in the jungle of Cuzco, 350 miles from Lima, Peru. Photograph: AP

- Government moves one step closer to expand Camisea project despite concerns about impact on indigenous peoples.

By David Hill*

January 14, 2014.- The Peruvian government is pushing ahead with plans to expand gas operations in a supposedly protected reserve in the Amazon despite calls by the United Nations to suspend them.

The company leading the operations, Pluspetrol, moved one step closer to proceeding with the expansion of the Camisea gas project – Peru's biggest ever energy development – following a report by the vice-ministry of inter-culturality (VMI) last week.

Pluspetrol's plans include drilling 18 wells and conducting seismic tests in an "intangible" reserve for indigenous peoples living in "voluntary isolation" and "initial contact" which is also part of the buffer zone for the Manu national park, where Unesco says the biological diversity "exceeds that of any other place on Earth."

The VMI, Pluspetrol and the energy ministry are continuing to push ahead with the expansion plans despite recommendations made by the UN's special rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples, James Anaya, during a visit to Peru in December.

"As if the UN's special rapporteur didn't exist or hadn't made an official visit," was how Servindi, a Peruvian news website, responded to the VMI's report.



Anaya made his recommendations in a formal, 2,714 word statement read at a press conference in Lima. One recommendation was that the government performs an "exhaustive study" of the indigenous peoples in the gas project region, and another that it "shouldn't proceed with the proposed expansion without previously and conclusively establishing that their human rights will not be violated."

"It's obvious that these groups are extremely vulnerable," Anaya said at the end of his eight day visit.

Pilar Cameno, from Peruvian NGO DAR, told the Guardian that the expansion could lead to "violent encounters" between gas project workers and indigenous peoples, "increased mortality rates", the loss of land and access to resources, and environmental contamination.

"The Peruvian state must heed the UN rapporteur's recommendations and implement them," Cameno says. "What's at stake here is the survival of the indigenous peoples in isolation and initial contact - not just as individuals, but as whole cultures."

Asked why Peru isn't heeding the Rapporteur's recommendations, the vice-minister for inter-culturality, Patricia Balbuena Palacios, told the Guardian that the government is waiting to receive an official report by Anaya.

"According to the correct channels, the Peruvian state must revise and issue an opinion on the report and then it must be accepted by the UN's human rights council who will send it to us as an official document," Balbuena Palacios says.

Anaya's recommendations follow an appeal last year by the UN's [committee on the elimination of racial discrimination](#) [1] (Cerd) to Peru to "immediately suspend" the expansion, and a follow-up letter from Cerd expressing concern that the "physical and cultural survival" of indigenous peoples would be put at risk.

The [VMI's report last week](#) [2] - on the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) of Pluspetrol's expansion plans - concluded that the company has done almost everything required of it to proceed, stating that 34 of 37 "observations" on the EIA made in a previous VMI report last November had been satisfactorily addressed by Pluspetrol.

One of the three outstanding "observations" is that Pluspetrol shouldn't conduct 3D seismic tests in one particular area of the reserve because of the "possible presence of people in isolation." According to the VMI's report last week, Pluspetrol responded by stating that satellite images of the area in question show no signs of "permanent or semi-permanent" human settlements; that it has an "anthropological contingency plan" in case of "undesired contacts with peoples in isolation"; and that, despite the fact it doesn't think the VMI's request "necessary", it will reduce the area for its 3D seismic tests by 6,300 hectares - a response considered unsatisfactory by the VMI.

The VMI's first report on Pluspetrol's EIA, dated last July, was much more critical, making 83 "observations" and stating that the Nahua people living in "initial contact" in the reserve could be "devastated" by the expansion and the Kirineri and Nanti people in "voluntary isolation" could be made "extinct." It also acknowledged that there are indigenous peoples in "voluntary isolation" in the far north-east and south-east of Pluspetrol's concession where the company wants to build wells and conduct further seismic tests - ignored by the VMI's two most recent reports.

However, the VMI's July report was almost immediately removed from the public sphere and subsequently rescinded. Key VMI personnel including the vice-minister of inter-culturality and the director of the head office for Indigenous Peoples' Rights resigned, and it was announced that another report would be written and a "special team", as Balbuena Palacios has described it, from outside the VMI was contracted to do so.

The concession operated by Pluspetrol, which leads a consortium of companies including Hunt Oil, Repsol and SK Corporation, is called Lot 88, 74% of which is superimposed over a reserve established in 1990. The seismic tests will involve thousands of underground explosions, and are



scheduled to take place across hundreds of square kms.

According to Perupetro, the state's oil and gas promotions agency, Lot 88 accounted for almost 30% of Peru's total oil and gas production in 2012.

The energy ministry and Pluspetrol could not be reached for comment.

*David Hill is journalist. You can follow it on their website: www.hilldavid.com [3] and his Twitter: www.twitter.com/ [4] @ DavidHillTweets

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