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Might Norway Blacklist Canadian Oil Firm Over Amazon Operations?

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Matses. Foto: David Hill

By David Hill*

17 February, 2015.- In September 2014 Norway's Finance Ministry revealed that the Council on Ethics for Norway's 'Government Pension Fund Global' (GPF) had recommended, back in December 2010, that the GPF divest its holdings in oil and gas company Repsol because of its operations in one of the remotest parts of the Peruvian Amazon.

The reason for the recommendation was the danger Repsol was considered to pose to indigenous people who live so remotely they have no regular, sustained contact with other people - dubbed as living in "isolation" (IPI) or "voluntary isolation" by Peruvian law, the UN and some anthropologists.

"There can be no doubt that the exploration activity undertaken by Repsol and Reliance Industries [one of Repsol's two minority partners] contributes to increase the risk that indigenous peoples, who may be living in voluntary isolation within the block, will come into contact with outsiders," the Council's recommendation read. "The Council notes in particular that the exploration phase seems to be particularly harmful to uncontacted peoples. There can thus be no doubt that there is a connection between the companies' operations and the risk of [serious or systematic human rights] violations taking place."



This recommendation had been made again in 2012 but was never acted upon because Repsol subsequently decided to sell its stake in the offending operations, in a 745,000 hectare concession called Lot 39, to UK/French firm Perenco, which the GPF, the world's largest sovereign wealth fund, doesn't invest in. That prompted the Council to do a u-turn in April 2014:

"The Council on Ethics has assessed whether the grounds for recommending the exclusion of Repsol and Reliance remain, given that Repsol has sold its share of the joint venture. Repsol can no longer be considered to contribute to possible violations of human rights in block 39 insofar as it no longer is a partner in the joint venture. Consequently the grounds for recommending Repsol's exclusion [from the GPF's "investment "universe"] are no longer present."

Nevertheless, the Council's recommendation, made after several years of research, sets an important precedent. If it is prepared to recommend that the GPF divests its holdings in Repsol - which stood at 2,469,337,837,64 Norwegian krone as of 31 December 2013 - because of the threats it posed to IPI in Lot 39, why shouldn't it make the same recommendation for other companies, in which it invests, operating in other areas inhabited by such people?

One such company is Pacific Rubiales Energy, in which the GPF, as of 31 December 2013, had holdings of 293,206,145,20 Norwegian krone. Pacific Rubiales currently holds the license to operate in Lot 135, deep in the Peruvian Amazon, which overlaps Matses territories and 100,000s of hectares of a proposed reserve for IPI.

The Matses have spoken out against Lot 135 for several years - not only because they're concerned about the potential impacts on their territories included within Lot 135, as well as an adjacent concession, Lot 137, also held by Pacific Rubiales, but because of the potential impacts on the IPI too.

"The Matses people confirms the presence of indigenous people in voluntary isolation in the upper River Yaquerana and River Yavari and, above all, in the oil Lots 135 and 137, based on recent studies by [national indigenous organization] AIDSEP and FUNAI [the Brazilian government institution responsible for indigenous peoples], and demands that Peru's Vice-Ministry of Inter-Culturality [the Peruvian government institution responsible for indigenous peoples] officially establishes the Tapiche Blanco-Yaquerana Territorial Reserve," reads a statement issued at the end of a meeting held by the Matses, from Peru as well as across the border in Brazil, last November. "We demand the immediate stop to all oil operations in those areas because they threaten the territories and the lives of the indigenous peoples in voluntary isolation."

During the meeting in November various Matses men expressed concern about the potential impacts of oil operations on the IPI.

"There really are signs and evidence of indigenous people who are still not contacted," said Raimundo Mean Mayoruna, president of the General Mayoruna Organization (OGM) in Brazil.

Pacific Rubiales has done some exploratory work in Lot 135, beginning in late 2012, conducting seismic tests and drilling wells. According to the former president of the Matses's legally titled "native community", which extends for almost half a million hectares but almost half of which is included within Lot 137, Ángel Uaqui Dunu Maya, evidence of IPI has been found in the very same areas the seismic lines were cut.

"Where did they go when they [Pacific Rubiales] were doing the seismic?" he asks. "That's my question."

Indigenous people living in "isolation" in the Amazon are extremely vulnerable to any kind of contact because of their lack of immunological defences. Contact can easily lead to the transmission of diseases, epidemics and fatalities, and it is common for 50% or more of a newly-contacted group to die.



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Published on Servindi - Servicios de Comunicación Intercultural (<https://www.servindi.org>)

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