

## **Neglected Isolated Indigenous Peoples in Ecuador**

*The advances in the defense of Isolated Indigenous Peoples (IIP), which have been supported by the Ecuadorian State for the last 14 years, have not been translated into an effective protection within their territories. Even the acknowledgment of the existence of these peoples in article 57 of the 2008 Constitution ceased to exist every time the extraction of resources was prioritized. Over and over again, a “schizophrenic” State failed to keep the promises made to protect their rights.*

**By Eduardo Pichilingue Ramos - July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2021**

Most of the Isolated Indigenous Peoples that live in Ecuador are Waorani and they are located in the Yasuní region, bordering Peru. Many family clans of this indigenous nation migrated along these almost-two-million-hectare lands. Before contacting the rest of the society, they were feared because of their reputation as great warriors, which gave them the name of *aucas* that means “savage” in Kichwa. This name allowed them to successfully defend their territory and to prevent rubber and oil businesses as well as outsiders from entering.

In 1958, the Guikitairi clan initiated a permanent contact process, forced by American missionaries from the Summer Institute of Linguistics. In the following decades, other families would start making contact and they would end up reduced to a small territory known as the Waorani Protectorate. Consequently, their ancestral land was left unprotected, which was taken advantage of by oil companies and colonization.

With time, other limits were added to the political borders of Ecuador: those of Yasuní National Park (1979), the Yasuní Biosphere Reserve (1989), the Waorani Territory (1990), the Tagaeri Taromenane Intangible Zone (1999), the areas of dozens of communities, and almost ten oil blocks. Additionally, there are five access roads, each one with its ramifications that cut through the land dividing the woods and affecting its sustainability, and complicating the survival of the Isolated Indigenous Peoples.

## **The Tagaeri and the Taromenani**

The Tagaeri and the Taromenani are the last indigenous peoples living in isolation who are officially recognized by the Ecuadorian State. However, there is evidence of other groups living in the Yasuní region as well as in the Kichwa and Sápara territories, in the south of the country.

Between 1972 and 1982, the oil boom attracted people to a place known today as the city of Francisco de Orellana. The clash with the Waorani families of the Nihuari clan, owners of the lands, was inevitable. The Ecuadorian State responded by promoting a new contact plan led by the Summer Institute of Linguistics. The imposition of “pacific” contact to a group that, by making use of their self-determination, wants to remain isolated deepened the internal conflict of succession. As a result, part of the group was separated: the Tagaeri clan.

Moreover, the term “taromenani” means “people of the road” and it is used to refer to a series of clans that are close to each other to a greater or lesser extent, and to the rest of the Waorani. They are most probably descendants of those families who decided to move to other territories before contact was made. This is the case of the Wiñatairi, which are still remembered by some Waorani families. Additionally, another Taromenani clan is known as Waneiri, but there is little information as to their existence. These distant clans, however, are considered by the Waorani to be “culturally related”.

Another group that some Waorani have started to differentiate from the Taromenani is the Dugakairi, who could be located between the Cononaco and the Nashiño Rivers, on both sides of the border with Peru. Finally, it is believed that the isolated indigenous people seen south of the Curaray River are of Sápara origin, which would be consistent with the evidence found on the other side of the border with Peru.

## **Two decades of conflict**

For decades, it was thought that the territory of the isolated clans was mainly in the Taromenane Intangible Zone (ZITT, as abbreviated in Spanish), with 818,501 hectares, as well as the neighboring lands to the northeast. It is important to clarify that the purpose of this zone was never to assert the land rights of isolated indigenous peoples, but to halt the aggressive progress of the oil industry and to guarantee the protection of an area that had not been divided into oil blocks yet.

However, pressure by oil block 14, 16, 31, and 43 regarding the land north to the ZITT generated displacements and an increase in conflicts between isolated clans and some Waorani communities. At the beginning of the 21st century, illegal logging reached a new high that caused the invasion of a good portion of the area and many deaths. These conflicts caused the massacre of 25 people in 2003, when the timber and the oil industry's interests aligned by considering isolated indigenous peoples to be an obstacle for the advance of their activities.

In 2009, while a minor road was being built near the settler-farmer town of Los Reyes, an isolated indigenous group attacked and killed three family members. Supposedly, the constant noise made by the power generators of the oil platform in Block 17 and the machines used by locals to open the road triggered the attack. It is evident that violence by the isolated groups tend to occur when those assaulted are close to the sources of noise.

In 2013, an attack by isolated people killed Ompore Omehuay and Buganei Caiga, elders from the Yarentaro community located in Block 16. This tragedy resulted in the massacre of a family of an isolated indigenous group and the kidnapping of two girls by the family of the victims as a form of revenge. Soon after, [a video in which Ompore narrated a peaceful encounter with isolated indigenous people](#) recognized as Taromenani was made public. They demanded to "take care" of the territory and to prevent more "cowore" (as non-Waorano people are called) and machines from entering. The fact that he was not able to fulfil these demands may have triggered the attack. Three years later, a young Waorani, Caiga Baihua, died when many lances pierced his body while returning to his community. It is believed that this death was motivated by revenge for the 2013 massacre.

All this violence may have led some isolated indigenous families to seek refuge and safety in far-off lands, where their ancestors lived, near the upper-stream of the Shiripuno river. According to the information gathered in Wentaro in 2020, at least two isolated clans may have settled in this area. These clans are not related and may include survivors of the 2013 massacre among its members.

### **Irresponsibility, extractivism, and the pandemic**

Since the first official attempts to provide some level of protection to these peoples, little has changed. In 2006, due to rumors of a new massacre that was never investigated, a process before

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the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) was initiated, and almost immediately, precautionary measures were granted to protect the isolated indigenous peoples of Yasuní.

As a response, two years later, the government of Ecuador implemented the Plan of Precautionary Measures, an office in charge of the protection of the IIP. During the following years, this response became uncomfortable for the cabinet and the office was moved from ministry to ministry. The members of the office were removed if they dared to question the contradictory policies of the Government.

At the same time, pressure from the oil sector caused the [abandonment of the Yasuní-ITT Initiative](#) and the beginning of the exploitation within the ITT (Block 43). Consequently, in order to show how “harmless” the exploitation was, the Government changed the official map showing the location of the isolated indigenous peoples in Yasuní, which had been presented before the IACHR a few months before, and “relocated” these people in southern territories, away from oil extraction sites.

In 2019, with Executive Decree No. 751 the almost-60-thousand-hectare increase in the Tagaeri Taromenane Intangible Zone was made official in order to abide by the voter’s will following a popular consultation. The increase was in an area that does not affect the oil industry’s interests and where there is not much pressure that could endanger the isolated indigenous peoples. Additionally, the decree lowers the protection of the territory by removing restrictions to the extraction of resources in the Buffer Zone surrounding the ZITT. This allows the oil companies to advance and leaves close to 400 thousand hectares vulnerable.

During the pandemic, the Ecuadorian State left the isolated peoples – the Waorani and neighboring peoples – to their own devices. While Covid-19 affected many indigenous communities that share territories with the IIP, in the Yasuní area, the extractive activities, both legal and illegal, grew fast and without any kind of controls. Moreover, [a new high in the illegal extraction of balsa wood \(\*Ochroma pyramidale\*\)](#) was reached in the Amazon to satisfy the growing demand of the Chinese market; and in the heart of Yasuní National Park worker crews opened [several kilometers of roads connecting the oil facilities](#) using chainsaws and other machinery.

Sixteen years after starting the case of the Tagaeri and the Taromenane against the Ecuadorian State, the IACHR decided to refer it to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. In January, 2021, it became the first case of isolated indigenous peoples to reach this instance. The Court's decision is expected to be published in approximately a year and a half. The result of this case is extremely important in order to demand the rights of other isolated indigenous groups of the region.

## **The importance of an integral protection**

Notwithstanding the importance of the Court's decision and the possibility of the Yasuní IIP's rights being respected, it is essential to think about the protection of their territory from an integral standpoint. Borders are imaginary lines and when they cross lands that are covered by huge rainforests, as it is the case of the Ecuadorian-Peruvian Amazon border, it is of the utmost importance to provide integral protection, particularly when there are no countries to the isolated indigenous people's mind.

In Peru, problems are similar. Legal and illegal extractive activities grow without being controlled. The proposal to create the [Napo-Tigre Territorial Reserve](#) next to the Yasuní, with more than a million hectares, has turned 16 years since its presentation. The delay in the official acknowledgment process is due to the oil blocks 39 and 67 located within those territories.

The Regional Organization of the People of the Eastern Amazon (ORPIO, as abbreviated in Spanish) and the Cuencas Sagradas alliance encourage the creation of the Yasuní-Napo-Tigre Binational Territorial Corridor, which would cover both of these areas and other neighboring lands where there is evidence of isolated indigenous peoples. These territories amount to over 6 million hectares and are some of the best conserved forest in all the Amazon. This corridor would be the last refuge of many isolated groups that, without the protection, may face a high risk of death.

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