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F U E L I N G D E S T R U C T I O N
I N T H E A M A Z O N

An Interview with Luis Macas

Dr. Luis Macas, president of the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE), is a Quechua Indian from the Saraguro region in the Andean highlands. A lawyer by training, he has been instrumental in leading the Indigenous people in Ecuador through their recent struggle for human rights and environmental protection. In April 1994, Dr. Macas was awarded the prestigious Goldman Environmental Prize, given to "grassroots heroes," for his role in negotiating the transfer of 3 million acres of rainforest back to indigenous control.

MULTINATIONAL MONITOR: Why was CONAIE formed?

MACAS: CONAIE was formed in November 1986 to carry on the struggles of the indigenous peoples' movement in Ecuador, including the fight to recoup our lands and to rescue our language and culture. Above all, it was formed to search for unity among all the indigenous nations through these common struggles, where before they had fought for their rights in isolation. CONAIE fights for the rights of human beings and for the life of the natural world, and works for a future of justice, equality, respect, liberty, peace and solidarity. It is an autonomous organization forged from the grassroots through a democratic process of active participation.

MM: What are some of the major issues facing indigenous peoples in Ecuador?

MACAS: The problems facing indigenous peoples are deeply connected to the issue of land ownership. When the colonizers arrived, they cleared out the Indians. Today, land is concentrated in the hands of the few, and many of our people don't have any land.

In the Amazon region, there is a crisis caused by the presence of oil and mining companies and their violations of indigenous peoples' rights. The displacement of people from their homes has made it impossible for indigenous people to meet basic living conditions.

The oil companies have not only caused the decomposition of our communities and the decomposition of our culture but also the destruction of the ecology. The fight for land is

thus extended to the struggle for maintaining the ecology.

The Seventh Licensing Round [in which the government grants land concessions to oil companies] now taking place will affect 85 percent of the Amazon region in Ecuador, including many territories of indigenous peoples. Yet this process includes no input from indigenous peoples. My concern is rooted in the 20 years of experience we've had with Texaco, which has shown us that vertical decision-making cannot adequately deal with our concerns.

Land ownership is also the central issue in the highlands, and it is an issue that must be resolved through negotiations. What often happens is the government tells the community that they should try to buy their land from landowners who then put a very high price on this land.

In the general uprising in 1990, many indigenous people in the highlands gained recognition of their rights to extricate themselves from feudal oppression and to acquire communal land title. But there is still much work to be done so that these people will have just conditions to be able to live a secure life on their land.

For example, agro-business companies who cultivate flowers for export are continuously pressuring our people to leave their lands. We have criticized these companies because large-scale extensive cultivation of flowers does not feed people. The profits of these companies merely enrich individual businessmen.

We believe agriculture should not be oriented this way. Instead, it should be geared toward self-sufficiency, to feed our people first, instead of being oriented toward export.

In the coastal area the principal problem is the cutting of the forests and the tricking of community leaders into allowing this to occur. The lumber companies are trying to get concessions of large areas to cut down the forests. The Chachi people, for example, who live in one of the last forest reserves in the western region, are constantly being pressured to lease their lands to lumber companies.

Commercial shrimp farmers have also destroyed indigenous lands in the coastal region, as well as having wiped out the few remaining mangrove forests along the coast.

These are the historic problems of Amazon indigenous peoples. But I think that they are broader and more complex given the neoliberal economic approach in Ecuador today. We are living in a process of structural adjustment in which the rise in prices for necessities affects all Ecuadorians, but the situation is even more serious for those most affected by structural adjustment -- indigenous peoples, who don't have any insurance, salary or other protection.

The policies of structural adjustment wear the mask of

modernization. But this modernization is really just privatization of government agencies and our natural resources. It's a way to hand them over to private interests. The struggle we're involved in is to avoid the impacts of structural adjustment, as manifested in the policies of privatization, multinational corporations and the upward adjustment of prices by the Ecuadorian government.

Strategically, there are two main directions in which we work: to fight for our rights as indigenous peoples and to help work for proposals for political change, together with other sectors of society. Therefore, we have made concrete political proposals not only for indigenous peoples, but for all of Ecuadorian society.

MM: What has been the role of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund in promoting the neoliberal approach?

MACAS: I think that the government follows the directives of the World Bank and the IMF very closely, and these are policies that impact indigenous peoples throughout Latin America. The Ecuadorian government has to accept the conditions of the IMF and World Bank in order to obtain new credit. And it doesn't matter if this negatively affects a great majority of Ecuadorians. What matters is that they do what is necessary to obtain credit. These are policies imposed from outside, but they create problems inside our country.

It's really part of a global problem that is very complicated. But we are questioning the priorities of multilateral banks and government agencies and will encourage them to intervene and affect the situation in Ecuador. We want multilateral development banks to see the impact of projects that are carried out in Ecuador. Loans for the modernization of the oil sector, for example, directly affect indigenous peoples by encouraging hazardous oil development on their lands.

MM: What are CONAIE's main demands of the government?

MACAS: A permanent demand to the government is that they genuinely legalize the ownership of indigenous lands in the Amazon. This would also serve as a way to preserve the environment. Despite the fact that indigenous lands are legalized -- with written land title -- the government still hands over the rights to take oil out of these lands to multinationals, claiming government ownership of what is under the land.

We are also asking for a complete investigation of what has happened until now with oil development, not only in terms of ecological impacts but also what has happened to our peoples, because what we are really talking about is the extinction of a people.

It is the position of CONAIE and other organizations

representing indigenous peoples of the Amazon that the Seventh Licensing Round should be postponed and a moratorium on oil development be put into effect until there are measures to protect the people of the Amazon.

MM: How has the government responded to your demands?

MACAS: The government has vacillated. They have never satisfied the aspirations of indigenous peoples. They have never engaged in a serious dialogue, so we have not had answers to our concerns. Moreover, the government has tried to manage and distort information both in Ecuador and in the international media by creating entities in order to control the indigenous movement. They claim to be "helping" indigenous peoples, but in reality, they are doing nothing to help. For example, without any discussion with indigenous organizations, the government recently created a Secretariat of Indigenous Affairs. For all the problems of the indigenous peoples to be reduced to just one office is absurd. Even when we are going through structural adjustment cutbacks, the government is creating these new bureaucratic entities. This is both contradictory and cynical.

MM: What has been the effect of Texaco's operations in the Ecuadorian rainforest?

MACAS: In terms of environmental impact, this is one of the greatest disasters that has taken place in the Ecuadorian Amazon. It is well known that the resources -- the biodiversity -- cannot be recuperated. There is no way to bring this back; it is now a biological desert.

Besides provoking a disappearance of species, there has also been a decomposition of communities in the Amazon. Texaco poisoned the places where people lived and worked and threw away its wastes in a totally irresponsible way.

Texaco is extracting a resource that brings tremendous wealth, but in the places where it has been extracted there is only poverty and slums that are not fit for human habitation.

Indigenous and environmental groups are now seeking to hold Texaco accountable in the U.S. courts. We have chosen the United States to air our concerns since that is where Texaco makes its decisions. There is no violation of Ecuadorian sovereignty, since the principal headquarters of Texaco is in the United States. Yet there has been a very violent reaction on the part of the Ecuadorian government to try to move this case to Ecuador. But from a legal and the political perspective it is appropriate to hear the case in the United States.

CONAIE will continue to press the Texaco case because among the plaintiffs are the Cofan peoples, who are members of CONAIE.

MM: What are the other elements of your campaign against the

company?

MACAS: Indigenous and environmental organizations have managed to make people in Ecuador aware of the necessity to defend the environment and also national sovereignty, because it runs against our national interest to hand over a vast area -- for example, 5 million acres under the new licensing round -- to multinationals. But also, importantly, an international network with ecological and human rights groups has been created in support of the human rights of indigenous people who are affected directly by oil development.

Fundamentally, we have tried to work for solidarity both inside and outside of the country. The response has been very positive and has led to a broad-based and concrete campaign against Texaco. When dealing with a multinational, it is important to look for help on an international level, and we've been able to find it. A great interest in solidarity organizations, with environmental groups on the national and international level, has meant that there has been a lot of help provided.

Our objective is to put pressure on oil companies in the United States, since the companies that are in Ecuador are U.S. companies. We want to make people in the United States aware that in Ecuador there are indigenous people who want to set a different course and have some say in what's going on. This campaign has had a lot of success and we hope it will be more fruitful in the future.

MM: What is the role of the Ecuadorian government in oil development?

MACAS: Unfortunately the national government has tried to transfer all aspects of the operation, exploration, exploitation and even the administrative part of oil development to foreign companies. The role of the government has been no more than to hand over extensive territories for prospecting and all the other steps of oil development. There has been no legislation or rules that would enable the government to exercise control over environmental impacts that are caused and there are no instruments that force the companies to comply with anything that would control the social and ecological impacts.

MM: Does Petroecuador, the state-owned oil company, act more responsibly than the multinationals?

MACAS: Petroecuador took charge of Texaco's operations. I do not believe that Petroecuador will impose policies for what can really be termed a true "development" of oil resources for the benefit of Ecuadorians. Working with the World Bank, the principal objective of Petroecuador has been to privatize the mechanisms of oil development into the hands of private companies.

MM: How has the military treated indigenous people in Ecuador?

MACAS: Until now, the military has said that the indigenous struggle is against the law of national security, so indigenous peoples have remained under constant threat. The military has worked to guarantee the security of the companies and they watch over and guard the companies' operations.

They say they care about national security, but obviously, the moment that they allow a company to fence off an extensive territory, they are handing over our sovereignty to foreign interests. When we protest this, the military says it is we who are threatening national security.

MM: Can you describe the role of multinationals in the agrarian sector?

MACAS: There is currently a plan that they call "modernization" in the agricultural sector, which is being processed by the Inter-American Development Bank. The plan's goal is to create a system which is run by agro-industry that would encourage agricultural production for export, disregarding the basic food needs of the Ecuadorian people.

MM: What is your alternative vision?

MACAS: CONAIE's agrarian reform proposal now in the Ecuadorian Congress is derived from the way that indigenous people see this question. It's meant to benefit not only the indigenous people but the entire agricultural sector. The first aspect is a restructuring of land ownership. It's impossible to talk about agricultural development when land is in the hands of the very few.

The second chapter deals with making production more dynamic and sustainable. The goal is not only to try to meet the needs of the farmer and his community, but the internal needs of all of Ecuador. This part of the law is directed at encouraging sustainable development of the Amazon, but it would also be applied in the coastal region.

The last part deals with the democratization of government institutions overseeing the agrarian sector in order to increase the participation of indigenous peoples and farmers, because now there is no democratic participation in these institutions. It is all a personal decision of the president.

MM: There's been a backlash of sorts against the indigenous movement in Ecuador. Can you describe the backlash and where its roots lie?

MACAS: There are various sectors that are involved in this reaction. They include the government, which has always tried to defame the aspirations of the indigenous movement, as well as the Agricultural Chamber of Commerce, the large landowners, the armed forces and the political interests of the right that have always fought against the indigenous movement. But now

the public as a whole is understanding our problem. They are understanding that it is a national problem, not only an indigenous one.

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