Ecuador's Waorani tribe vows to protect life in Amazon

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A Waorani indigenous man takes part in a march over oil exploration in his ancestral lands

Spears and poisoned blowguns at hand, the Waorani people say they are ready to strike down invaders of their Amazon homelands, just like their

forefathers did.

But now their battle is in court, and their enemies—Ecuador's government and oil multinationals—are faceless.

The prize is their corner of Ecuador's Amazon rainforest, ancestral lands where exploration licenses are up for grabs under a government plan to sell lucrative land concessions to oil companies.

A judge in the provincial capital Puyo is to rule on Friday on the tribe's legal challenge to the government's selloff, and a shiver of apprehension is running through their village of Nemompare, deep in the dripping rainforest.

"The government sees oil and money but the Waorani see it is full of life," says community leader Nemonte Nenquimo.

The 4,000 or so Waorani scattered across the vast Pastaza province in eastern Ecuador believe their land is the front line in a battle for the future of the planet.

Some communities have rejected all contact with the outside world, but the Waorani are sufficiently worldly to know that the battle is being lost elsewhere.

Time to act

"Humans are changing the planet because big companies, big factories are destroying it. It is the moment now for the peoples to join and protest, to live well. If we don't protest, if we don't carry out actions, it means we are destroying the planet," said Nenquimo.

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The tiny settlement of Nemompare is home to around 50 Waos.

Many flit through the thick leaves along the shaded forest pathways in scant traditional garb as they gather leaves for weaving or plants for food. Others wear shorts and tee-shirts. The men use blow-guns to hunt small animals.

Debanca, another community leader, her face painted red underneath a feathered headdress, gestured across the muddy brown Curaray river on the settlement's edge.

"Do you want oil companies to enter and kill the jungle, do away with clean territory, with clean water?" she asked AFP's reporters through an interpreter.

The settlement is located 40 minutes by small plane from Shell, the local town that adopted the oil company's name since its first incursion into the jungle in the late 1930s.

With the support of other Wao communities across the province, the Nemompare community went to court to try to block exploration licenses to prevent more destruction of the kind which contaminated their water and gouged out large areas of once-pristine rainforest.

"I am not here for myself, rather for the future, all the kids that will come," says Nenquimo, president of the Waorani Council of Pastaza, which filed the lawsuit last month to set aside 180,000 hectares from any exploration.

"Thanks to my father, thanks to my grandfather, I still have forest that is alive, with no contamination. They were defenders, caretakers, guardians of the jungle and they are doing this with me—I don't feel alone."

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Defend the jungle 'with our lives'

In Nemompare, the Wao store rainwater in huge tanks for their consumption, supply themselves with energy with solar panels and sleep in hammocks.

Although they learned to write with the "Kowori" or outsiders—mainly missionaries—they do not use paper. Instead, they keep alive their unique language, wao terere.

Sitting near an open fire in the center of a hut, Wina Omaca, a grandmother recognized as a wise elder or "Pekenani," summed up the mood of resistance.

"It's not just the 'tapaa' (spear), but the 'campa' and 'aweka' (machete and hatchet) are ready too," she said.

Nobody speaks of armed resistance here, let alone a war, but the message appears to be that the Waorani could turn their home into hostile territory for oil company engineers.

"Let it be clear. We will defend our jungle, our culture and our rights, with our lives," said Nenquimo.

Ecuador's constitution recognizes the Waorani rights to 800,000 hectares of jungle.

Crucially, the wealth in the subsoil belongs to the state. The legal challenge to safeguard 180,000 hectares represents less than 1 percent of Ecuador's area.

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The state reached an agreement with the Waorani during a consultation process over oil exploration in 2012, but the tribe's leaders say they were duped and refuse to recognize the agreement.

'Our land is not for sale'

For now the fight is in the courts, but there are fears over their reaction to an adverse decision.

Two of the more far-flung clans, the Taromenane and Tagaeri have been

involved in deadly clashes.

"They have not had a friendly relationship," said Miguel Angel Cabodevilla, a Spanish missionary who has studied the tribe for three decades.

Tribal elders reported between 20 and 30 dead in clashes in 2013.

But "the main violence has been against them, almost always, and been more aggressive," said Cabodevilla.

"Their lands have been taken from them, they have been persecuted and killed, they have been enslaved, and now the wealth in the subsoil is being taken from them without adequate compensation."

Tribal elder Peke Tokare—his earlobes stretched by wooden discs—points a long finger at the slogan on his tee-shirt, written in wao terere: "Our land is not for sale."

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