

Amazon community files lawsuit against Chinese firm over gas flaring

December 11 2020, by Diego Sánchez



Waorani indigenous women pictured after filing a climate change lawsuit against Chinese oil company PetroOriental in El Coca, Orellana province, Ecuador, on December 10, 2020

Indigenous Waorani from Ecuador's Amazon filed a lawsuit Thursday

against state-owned Chinese oil company PetroOriental, accusing it of contaminating their ancestral lands by burning off natural gas from oil wells in a process known as flaring.

Leaders of the Waorani village of Miwaguno went to a court in Francisco de Orellana, the main town of Orellana province east of Quito, to file the lawsuit "as victims."

"We have seen our way of life altered forever," the community stated in the complaint. "Our very survival is threatened as a result of climate change."

The local people are objecting to the widespread practice of flaring, where oil producers—in this case PetroOriental—deliberately burn off millions of cubic meters of natural gas produced from oil wells.

Environmentalists say the province of Orellana has a high concentration of oil burners, and the Waorani say the smoke produced is contaminating their land and [water sources](#).

"The rainfall tastes like coal. We still use it because we don't have drinking water," said Menare Omene, a 52-year-old Waorani woman, whose community of about 150 people presented the complaint.

PetroOriental operates exploration blocks 14 and 17 in Orellana province, which yield about 10,000 barrels of oil per day (bpd).



A burner belonging to Chinese oil company PetroOriental near the Miwuaguno village, Orellana province, Ecuador, on December 10, 2020

Crude oil is Ecuador's main source of foreign currency, its 469,000 bpd generating \$3.35 billion in the year to September.

Ecuador's Energy Ministry estimated in 2018 that for every barrel of oil produced, about 5 cubic meters of [natural gas](#) is burned.

An environmental NGO supporting the Waorani's case, Accion Ecologica, said that if the flares are extinguished, the gas could be used to generate electricity. That would demand heavy investment in the face of the cheaper option of burning it, it said.

"We want them to turn off the burners because of the environmental damage to our land. It's full contamination," said the Miwaguno village leader Juan Pablo Enomenga.

The village is located relatively close to [oil wells](#) where several PetroOriental burners are flaring.

He said that for the past 15 years, local production of yucca and plantain, the basis of his community's diet, has gradually declined, blaming [environmental pollution](#).



The Waorani are calling on authorities to shut down oil burners flaring off natural gas within their territory in Ecuador's Amazon region



Waorani indigenous woman Juana Mintare poses after filing a lawsuit against Chinese oil company PetroOriental in Orellana province Ecuador, on December 10, 2020

"What we sow on the farm does not even yield 50 percent" compared to previously, he said.

Accion Ecologica said that up to January this year, it had registered 447 burners operating in the Ecuadoran Amazon, including 159 in Orellana alone.

The Waorani are a community of around 5,000 people, owning around 800,000 hectares in the provinces of Napo, Pastaza and Orellana, the

latter two bordering Peru.

Ecuadoran law recognizes indigenous jurisdiction over their ancestral territory, but maintains state ownership of the subsoil.

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