Earth's Blood

A nature-worshiping Indian tribe vows to stop an oil giant in Colombia

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ON MOST SUBJECTS, EBARISTO Tegria can be calm, articulate, as buttoned-down as the shirts he wears and as rational as the computer on his desk. But words just about fail the 30-year-old Colombian lawyer when he speaks of the people who run Occidental Petroleum. "They want to take the blood from the heart of the world!" he tells anyone willing to listen (a category that has included princes, foreign ministers and members of the European Parliament). "They want to sterilize the earth, extinguish the Indian community and destroy the universe!"

Tegria says he's part of a divinely inspired mission to save it. He and other leaders of northeastern Colombia's 7,000-member Uwa tribe have vowed to stop Occidental from drilling anywhere near their territory. According to the company's geologists, seismic tests suggest that an untapped pool of up to 1.3 billion barrels—a godsend to Colombia's battered economy—may be buried right beside the Uwas' lands. And that's where the tribe's nature-worshiping priests say it should stay. Oil is the earth's blood, they insist: pumping it out of the ground would upset the cosmic balance and send the world spinning toward destruction. Uwa leaders have warned that the tribe would be ready to commit mass suicide rather than let that happen.

Colombia's 35 million people can only pray things never reach such a pass. Still, many of them welcomed an appellate court ruling last week that will let Occidental proceed with exploratory drilling just outside Uwa territory. The project has been on hold since March, when the tribe won a temporary restraining order against Occidental. Meanwhile the country is enduring its worst recession in half a century, with unemployment at 20 percent and a sharply devalued peso. Economists and industry analysts say a major oil strike could create 5,000 jobs and add as much as $14 billion to the national treasury in the next 25 years. Otherwise the country's fields are expected to run dry by 2005, leaving the drug lords, the Marxist rebels and the right-wing death squads brawling in an economy bereft of its No. 1 export.

Even so, the tribe has rallied major U.S. support against the drilling. Most Uwas live in a world of jungle spirits, not newspaper editorials. They subsist on beans and berries and speak the language of their ancestors. In recent years, though, they have sent a few dozen young people off to learn Spanish and attend high school or college. Tegria, the only lawyer among

Buried trouble: *A member of the Uwa governing council at a local anti-drilling protest, an Occidental company truck rumbles along an unpaved road outside Uwa tribal boundaries*

them, began school at 7. He says his parents sensed that someday the tribe would need his skills. Five years ago he and other young Uwas grabbed international headlines by vowing their people would leap off a 1,400-foot "cliff of death" if drillers violated tribal lands.

The apocalyptic threat led to the creation of the Uwa Defense Working Group, a bloc of nine U.S.-based human-rights and environmental organizations. "They talked to us about their deep spiritual beliefs and their role as protectors of the earth," says Atossa Soltani, executive director of Amazon Watch. "They told us they were willing to die. It got us incredibly fired up."

The tribe and its U.S. friends have fought Occidental relentlessly ever since. Uwa supporters in more than a dozen U.S. cities have picketed the offices of Fidelity Investments, the world's largest mutual fund company, urging it to divest an estimated $500 million in Occidental shares. Protesters have dogged Al Gore's presidential campaign, tirelessly heckling the candidate about his father's close business and personal ties to Occidental's founder, the late Armand Hammer. The tribe's allies gathered daily in Bel Air, California, chanting and drumming at dawn outside the home of Ray Irani, Occidental's chairman and chief executive, until he sued to stop the noise.

Company vice president Larry Meriage argues that some U.S. groups are using the tribe to push their own agenda. "The Uwa issue for them is part of a broader, antidevelopment strategy to shut down oil exploration around the world," he says. Such aims are certainly in line with the tribe's religious objections to "taking the blood from the earth." Meriage says Occidental has been talking with the Uwas since the mid-1980s, and no one mentioned a taboo against prospecting for oil until the late 1990s. That's when the tribe began making contact with U.S. environmentalists.

The company claims to be doing all it can to treat the Uwas and the land with respect. Occidental's engineers insist they know how to tap an oilfield with minimal environmental harm. And company executives say they used Uwa maps and voluntarily reduced their area of exploration by 75 percent to keep from encroaching on ancestral lands. What's left is no unspoiled wilderness. The ground was cleared years ago for farming and cattle ranching. "The [activists] and the Uwas keep repeating that we are going to drill in this pristine wilderness, because it creates an emotional response in the public," complains Meriage. "They're tugging on people's emotions, rather than dealing with facts."

But it is a sad fact that oilfields in Colombia have their own kind of life cycle. The new gusher sets off a stampede of eager job seekers and their families. Prices, prostitution and crime soar. There is never enough work for everyone. The newcomers quickly overwhelm the rural infrastructure of schools, police and health care. Tribal customs and other local traditions are abandoned. Eventually the field runs dry. "Occidental may be able to avoid the direct environmental effects of oil drilling in the immediate well area," says Ernesto Guhl, a former Environment deputy minister. "But it will be absolutely impossible for the company or anyone else to prevent a mass migration of job seekers to the region, and all the related problems of deforestation, social dislocation, prostitution and damage to the traditional Uwa way of life."

With or without oil, tribal life may be doomed. About 100 miles east of the Uwas' territory, a pipeline runs from another Occidental oilfield to the Atlantic Ocean. Leftist guerrillas have attacked the pipeline more than 700 times since 1986, befouling the countryside with eight times the crude that was spilled in the Exxon Valdez disaster. The rebels seem to be staking a claim on Uwa land as well. Last year they kidnapped three U.S. activists from the edge of the tribe's territory and a week later executed them with four bullets each to the face. Sooner or later the drug lords will discover Uwa country. Environmental experts say the tribe's spectacularly diverse lands offer perfect niches for growing all three of Colombia's chief outlaw crops: cocaine, opium and marijuana.

Yet the Uwas seem ready to confront any threat to their way of life. The tribe is taking its case to the Constitutional Court, Colombia's highest court. A final ruling could take as long as nine months. Meanwhile the company has a legal right to begin drilling. Occidental has already spent $15 million researching and exploring the region. Geologists figure the chance of a significant oil strike here at roughly 20 percent. That means the Uwas have an 80 percent chance of being left alone—for now. ■