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Promoting Social Justice, Human Rights, and Peace

Flames in the Forest

(*Survival International* 1994: 53 min.)

Transcribed by Darrell G. Moen

Luis Vargas (Leader, Amazon Indian Federation - Ecuador): I'm here so that my voice of protest as an Indian leader, will be heard. So that people around the world will hear about our protest against the multinational companies, especially the oil companies in the Amazon region of Ecuador.

Luis Vargas (narrator): We, the Achuar, have lived in these lands for many generations, here, in Ecuador's southern Amazon region, as our ancestors taught us.

Achuar man: Look at this. Nothing but weeds are growing here now. They probably cut down the cinnamon trees that were here. They've scraped off all the clay we use for pottery and the white mineral used for painting. Look at what they've done with their bulldozer. Look at the little frog, dying. The English company British Gas now has this concession. They drilled the wells here. There used to be plenty of fish here, but now, because of contamination and the oil they poured into the river, many fish have been wiped out and there is very little hunting left. The company cheated us. They said they wouldn't cause any damage. They said they'd work in areas where there were no people. But this is our land, we live here.

Luis Vargas: The government has handed over much of our territory as oil concessions. Often, the first we know is when they start cutting survey lines and we hear the motors and the explosions of their seismic work.

Achuar man: I don't want them here. The company should get out. Look, their line came from over there, it passed through here and they put this post here. We were against them drilling here, so they drilled over there. I don't know how many kilometers it is, but it passed through here and went through to there. There are other survey lines through there.

Unidentified American oil company seismologist: We have to ask permission and we have to compensate them for their crop damage, if there are any crops. Any valuable

fruit trees, we have to compensate them for. We have to work very closely with the Indian community.

Achuar woman: We've always exchanged cinnamon flowers for the things we need. But when they put lines through the forest, they cut down the trees. That's why we have so few left. I've managed to save this one, and there are a few left in the forest. We've gathered these flowers and seeds for a long time. Now we have to live from the few trees that are left. Look how the tree is loaded [with cinnamon]. This is why none of us want the company here anymore, [they are killing our way of life].

Luis Vargas: We, the indigenous peoples, have our own civilisation, an authentic civilisation as Indian people. It's a civilisation that the Spanish with their invasion tried to destroy. But we believe that it is a rich civilisation, and one that must be preserved for the sake of all humanity. We've always defended our way of life in the southern Amazon. But now we feel threatened by the growing oil company presence. The same happened before in the north of the Ecuadorean Amazon. Another company, Arco, it's North American, is planning to drill in this area, close to the village of Sarayacu where people are very worried about the impact it may have.

We want to visit the production areas in the north with two women from Sarayacu who belong to our organisation. The north has most of the colonisation and most of the oil operations. That's why it's important that the Indian organizations get to know that area. It is very important that we get to know the problems caused by the oil companies.

Quichua woman: That's why we want to go. I've heard how one community kicked a company off their land. We can learn from their experience. Noemi, how will you report on this on your radio program?

Luis Vargas: Yes, it's vital to see for yourself so you can denounce it on the radio. Or just do a report. If you denounce it, you'll probably get the sack [lose your job].

Noemi Guallinga (Quichua woman): I work at the radio [station]. My reports are heard by many Indian communities. Some of the reports are about the problems we face. That's why I'm planning this journey. This is the land where I was born, where my parents were born, and where my grandparents lived in the old days. This is where I was born and brought up. I have lived happily in these lands since I was a little girl. Our forests are our life. This is what our parents taught us. We cannot live without the forests, nor without our lands or our rivers.

Hilda Santi: I am going with Noemi and Lucho Vargas to get to know the wells around Lago Agrio - the Cuyabeno wells. We want to know the areas that have suffered most. If we know that area, we'll have a better idea how to defend ourselves at the Morote well. No matter how far I go from this place, I'll always come back.

The land calls me back wherever I am. The Cuyabeno [in northern Ecuador] is a beautiful area. It is still protected. Victoriano and his family are protecting this area. Victoriano says years ago there were giant boas and alligators which made it dangerous to cross the river. Victoriano retains all his Indian traditions. It's a lovely place and it should be protected so lots of people can come and see what the Amazon is really like.

Victoriano: First the companies built their roads. Then they brought their machinery and drilled the wells. They contaminated the forest. The animals can't live here now. They've sought refuge far away. The animals near the river are dying. Now everything is disappearing.

Noemi: Oil everywhere! This looks like a lagoon in hell. This is what they should be filming. It looks as if the water is mostly oil. It goes from one pit to another. The smell is wiping out everyone who lives in this part of the Amazon. It's boiling, the oil is boiling. It's extraordinary. I've never seen anything like it in all my life. Talking about it is one thing. But what would our elders in Sarayacu think if they saw all this?

Look at all this! Dead butterflies, poor things. The air is contaminated. It's terribly hot, the heat is killing me. I felt fine when I came here. But with all this smoke from the oil, my head is spinning. If I feel like this [with terrible headaches] after just a few days, what must it be like for those who live here? We'll go back to our communities feeling deeply shocked.

Luis Vargas: While Hilda and Noemi went to Cuyabeno, I went to the oil town of Lago Agrio in the main production area. We're heading [in a small plane] from Lago Agrio towards Coca. We can see well sites on the road. This is the oil producing area. The forest is being destroyed. There has been a dramatic change. In this area of Coca and Lago Agrio there has been a drop in rainfall. The missionaries used their light aircraft to identify isolated Indian villages. We Indians also use these small planes to fly over the oil wells and take photographs so we can denounce what's happening.

Luis Vargas: Look at these muddy streets, they're unmade, full of water, full of flies and rubbish. The people here in Lago Agrio live in squalor. When it rains, the streets are slippery, covered in oil. There is contamination and disease. This is the pitiful state people are forced to live in at the gateway to the oil industry in the Ecuadorean Amazon. Here in the northeastern Amazon there are hundreds of oil wells which are owned by more than a dozen foreign companies. They occupy over 80% of the land up here.

Charlie Hearne (PetroEcuador - Texaco): When Texaco-Gulf first started out here, there was no one out here. And then now, we've got a club with a six-lane bowling alley and a theater that seats about 185 people. Oh, we get caught every now and then if

they burn off a bit, they get us for air pollution, which I don't know what they [the company] pays. I have no idea what the fines are, but I don't think we're paying anything. We're real lax here, real lax [environmental regulations].

Luis Vargas: Another problem we have up here is colonisation. The oil industry and colonisation go hand in hand. Here we can see the oil pipelines, the houses of the colonists, and the ecological destruction. These are the difficulties we have to face while the government claims the oil industry has no impact. But the impact lies in the problem of colonisation, massive, uncontrolled colonisation in the Ecuadorean Amazon. The Cofanes are one of the six Indian nations in the Ecuadorean Amazon. They are part of our regional organisation CONFENIAE. We are more than 200,000 people in all. I wanted to hear from the Cofanes how they had kicked Texaco out and stopped the company from drilling six wells on their land. So far, they've only drilled one.

Cofanes man: Look at these. We use them as bait for fishing. It's terrible. Look at all these dead insects. The birds are dying in great numbers. It's very sad. How can we let the company go deeper into our territory? They're killing the animals on which we depend. We need these insects to make necklaces, to buy things we need. It'll be worse if they go further. Everything will be destroyed. That's why we don't want them.

Cofanes woman: If the government continues to ignore us, we'll use our spears and our shotguns to kill the people who invade us, just as our forefathers did. When they tried to take our land for their wells, we forced them to leave and blocked the roads. This has always been our territory. We don't want any wells here. Look at these terrible flames in our forest!

[End of Part One]

Achuar woman: I'll tell you a story about a boa that ate people. Its mouth was as big as a house. It was wiping out the people. It ate so many people, they were being wiped out. One man dreamt he'd discovered a way to save the people. In the dream, he was told to use a cane knife which was double-edged. When he entered the river, the boa swallowed him alive. Inside the boa, he saw many other people. He'd been told, "When you're inside the boa, use your knife and cut out the heart."

It's the same now, with the companies that come and take all the oil. They take all our wealth, everything. They're trying to kill us. But just as the people did with the boa, we're getting organised and are fighting back. Now our people have really woken up.

Luis Vargas: [in an Achuar village] Now, we'll show you the film we made in Lago Agrio and Hilda will tell you about the trip.

Hilda: This is what oil looks like. Look at that flame, when you get close, there is a terrible smell. It's the smoke that causes the smell. We must stop the oil companies working in our region of Pastoza. This is what I saw. There are pits full of oil, there was a thick layer of oil on the water. Look, more pits with oil and water coming out.

Achuar man: As she says, we must defend our lands. We must go to Quito [the capital] and talk to them in our own language. Then they will realise that we really are from here, that we are the true, native people of the forest. We must all unite and defend our lands.

Luis Vargas: Our main reason for our journey to the capital, Quito, was that we'd heard that British Gas had signed a new two-year contract with the government to carry on exploring in our area. We wanted to know if it was true. We had let them know we were coming four days before our visit, but they wouldn't see us. At first, they even told us the director was out of the country. But he was there, and in the end we met him briefly. He didn't give us any new information. They told us we were interrupting their Christmas party.

Achuar man: That was terrible. Before, I didn't know what was going on. Now, I know what they are like. I can see how bad they are. I don't believe those who say they're good. I've seen with my own eyes what they're like.

David Wiman (Director, British Gas - Ecuador): We feel that they're just trying to get publicity for their cause, recognising their land rights. But we do recognise that during the operations they may have to travel further to do their hunting. But it is not a permanent damage to the ecosystem. During the drilling operations, the noise does drive animals away from our drill sites, but our studies show that within a kilometer or kilometer and a half of our drill site normal animal life existed. So we feel that most of the claims are unfounded. None have been presented directly to British Gas.

Achuar man: We don't want them on our land. If they ignore us and come back, we will welcome them in our own way. There may be people who still want them, but I don't want them anywhere near our lands. They just cause damage and bring disease. If they force their way in here, we'll be as tough as the Waorani.

Achuar man: Chuindia is where we live now. Before, there was no one here, just the forest. So this is where we settled. Once, there was a lot of hunting here. Now it's getting difficult. We've looked after our children well, growing our crops of yuca here. They're brought up in the traditional manner. They learn to hunt and eat forest food. This is how we bring them up and feed them. We used to live well here in Chuindia. But then one day the company arrived.

Dr. Clemente Ponce (British Gas Representative): I [speaking in Spanish] want you to do the introductions. Tell them the company is back again this year. We're going to give out Christmas presents and we're going to give out sweets.

Achuar man: We thought, when he first arrived, that he was just bringing the children sweets. But with these companies, things are never that simple.

Dr. Clemente Ponce: Stay where you are. We'll bring you the presents. Don't move. We'll give you a present each. We'll come round with a gift for each of you. We're going to clear up the site. We'll be doing the reforestation. We've already started in Tigrillo. If anyone here in Chuindia wants work, they can go there and ask. We need three or four men.

Achuar woman: Tell him to leave the forest alone.

Achuar man: There is no need for you to do any planting there. Let the forest recover by itself.

Achuar woman: If they do the planting, nothing will grow. All the plants will die, it's too hot now. You'll probably come back and lie to us here on the same spot.

Luis Vargas: When companies talk about reforestation, it's just for their image. They know our protest is being heard all over the world. They're trying to patch up the damage caused by the drilling. The companies are all claiming to be environmentally aware.

David Wiman (Director, British Gas - Ecuador): We feel that we can operate with the people living there. We need to keep an open dialog with them. And I'm sure that with time they will understand and welcome the activity. Today, with modern technology, we've learned a lot, and we do a lot more containment type of work and we don't believe that we will have the kind of environmental consequences that took place in the northern part of [Ecuador].

Luis Vargas: With their publicity, British Gas wants to give the impression that they are concerned about the environment. But if this company goes ahead with its oil operations, using the same methods as other companies in the Amazon, they will destroy thousands of insects and animals in the area. But that doesn't surprise me. On my previous visit to London, I tried to raise the matter with them. They refused to even see me. I was furious. What concerns us most in the south are the plans Arco has. They're bringing their drilling equipment down from the north.

David H. Bennyhoff (Director, Arco - Ecuador): What you might call the modern-day explorers that are down in Ecuador and in the Latin American region in general,

have taken a different view, as people throughout the world have, on the environment. Arco has put into place several environmental protection measures in the building of this location. For instance, we've tried to cut down on the size of the area needed to be cleared for the drilling operation.

This present location that we're building is approximately four acres versus 12 acres. Unfortunately, unlike a village that's very close to our drilling location, the outside influences have alienated the people toward development. During the seismic operations, a group from Sarayacu, about 30 or 40 villagers came out with arms and threatened to do bodily harm to our workers. And as it ended up, we had to abandon all our work within the area of Sarayacu, about a 20 kilometer diameter around the village.

When we started preparing the drilling site to bring in the drilling rig, several groups of people from the village, again about 25 or 30, came and made some signs when we weren't there and then came to the drilling site after some of our people came back and threatened to do bodily harm again to any company people that showed up. So what we ended up doing and agreeing to do with the government was that they employ 11 military personnel at the location. They did that, and since the military people have been there, there's been absolutely no problems.

Achuar woman: When I see the military, I feel a great loathing. Our children will suffer most, the small children. When the land is finished, when the trees are finished, when the fish and the forest animals are gone, when the rivers are destroyed, where will our children swim? Our rivers will be covered in oil. Our people are being terrorised. Why?

Because of the oil. In our lands, there are jaguars, boas, dolphins, crocodiles, and many other animals. We take care of them. We are the caretakers. We are looking after all these animals. We are looking after the plants and trees. The government brings strangers and gives them our lands. They take the oil and our animals are wiped out. They want to wipe us out too. But we are Indians, real Ecuadoreans, before Ecaudor became a country called Ecuador.

Luis Vargas: When I visited the north, I saw the huge military presence close to the oil wells. There are hundreds of soldiers, whole battalions, and it made me worry about our future.

Colonel Ivan Beddgoyen (Ecuadoran military): This is the most important region in our country. The bulk of our wealth comes from the oil-producing region. So in accordance with national security legislation we are here to ensure that the oil installations are protected.

Luis Vargas: Every time we complain to the government, they say we should accept progress and work with the oil companies. Is this what they mean by "progress"? Many people dismiss us as savages and say we're obstacles to development. But for me, those who do this [to our environment and our homes] are the real savages. I wish people who buy shares in British Gas, Arco, and other companies could see the effects of oil operations in our Amazon region.

What can we, the Indian peoples, do now? Negotiate, talk to the government? This we are doing and will continue to do until the government in Ecuador listens to us and treats us like rational beings. We're denouncing this to the world and demanding a halt to oil exploration. We can't stop what's already there. They'll just press ahead. But we're demanding compensation so we can develop our own projects for the Indian peoples of Ecuador and of the Amazon, to protect our lifestyles and our environment.

Achuar woman: Just as in the past the man cut the heart out of the boa and stopped it eating the people, we will put an end to the oil companies. All right? This is the message I want you to take to your people.