

[Amazon Watch](#)

Yasunidos Defends Signatures and Denounces Electoral Irregularities

Quito, Ecuador – Just five days after turning in more than enough signatures to qualify for a national referendum to stop oil drilling plans in a critical part of Ecuador's Yasuni National Park, Yasunidos, the civil society collective spearheading the grassroots effort is denouncing what appear to be egregious irregularities by the National Election Commission (CNE).

According to Yasunidos, the chain of custody of the boxes with more than 755,000 signatures was broken. In a visit to the CNE yesterday, members of Yasunidos discovered boxes of signatures with seals broken and tops off. The boxes only were to be opened in front of a monitoring team trained by CNE and organized by Yasunidos. The National Electoral Commission, appointed by the government, has 30 days to verify the signatures.

"The chain of custody is a critical component of ensuring a transparent and non-partisan process, Esperanza Martinez, a member of Yasunidos and president of Acción Ecológica. "We are asking the CNE to explain why the chain of custody was broken. We will not continue with the process until we are satisfied with their explanation," she declared.

As soon as word got out this morning that the Ecuadorian military was attempting to remove boxes of signatures from the CNE headquarters, Yasunidos put out a call to defend signatures asking supporters to contact President Correa, CNE and Ecuadorian Embassies around the world. Yasunidos mobilized and blocked military trucks for hours. The military has now begun to remove some boxes and said that they are taking them to a site at the former national airport where counting and verifying will begin.

Additionally, irregularities have surfaced over the copies of national IDs of signature gatherers. The CNE appears to have "misplaced" or "lost" photocopies of the national IDs of over one hundred signature gatherers. The copy is a requirement for signature gatherers, and the lack of the photocopy ID would result in the nullification of every signature they gathered. In total, that number could be over one hundred thousand, which would put the collective very close to the minimum 600,000 or 5% of the population needed to force the referendum. According to the CNE, Yasunidos only turned in 1,275 copies of IDs, while collective claims they submitted 1,426. But, in a telling example, the photocopy of Esperanza Martinez's ID was said to not have been turned in, only to be found later.

"It is extremely troubling to see these kinds of irregularities so soon into the verification process. It calls into question whether the CNE can indeed be objective and non-partisan. The eyes of the world are watching – this is a critical moment for Ecuador's democracy and the credibility of Correa's administration," said Kevin Koenig, Ecuador Program Director of Amazon Watch.

Over the 6 months that Yasunidos had to collect signatures, members of the collective reported repression and intimidation from the government and supporters of drilling. The Correa administration and local municipalities sought to restrict where signatures could be collected, and launched its own pro-drilling signature gathering effort that had little public support, but copied Yasunidos' materials to confuse citizens trying to sign in favor of defending Yasuní.

President Correa challenged Yasuni supporters to get the needed signatures in a national television address after announcing drilling plans. "If you want a referendum, don't be lazy, go get the signatures," he told the nation. Now, the government is in the uncomfortable position that the issue may indeed be up for a vote.

In August of last year, Ecuador's President Rafael Correa abandoned its revolutionary plan which had sought to keep the ITT (Ishpingo, Tambococha, Tiputini) oil fields permanently in the ground in exchange for international financial contributions to help offset the country's forgone revenues. In August, perhaps due to pressure from China, he authorized drilling. In response, thousands of Ecuadorians have taken to the streets to collect signatures and defend Yasuní ITT, the most biodiverse and culturally fragile part of Yasuní National Park, an area of extremely high biodiversity located in the Amazon region of Ecuador. The park was declared a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in 1989 and contains what are thought to be the greatest number of plant and animal species anywhere on the planet including one of the biggest populations of jaguars. It is also home to numerous indigenous peoples including two nomadic Waorani clans, the Tagaeri and Tarmenane, who shun contact with the outside world.