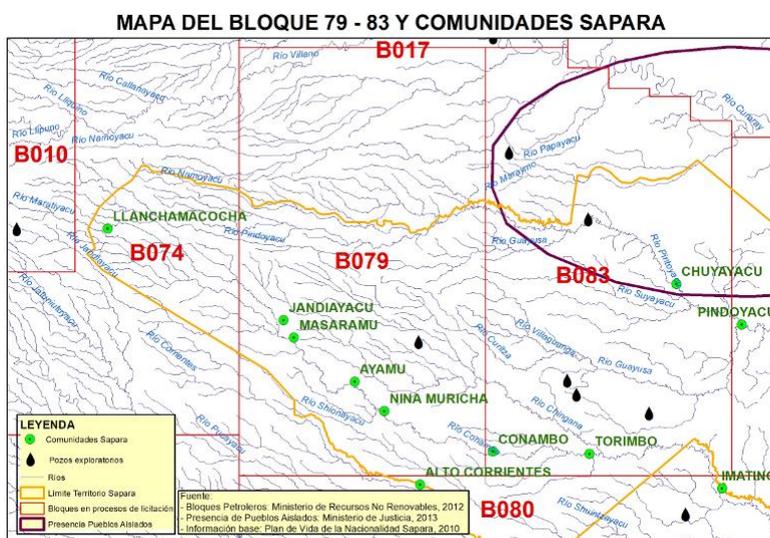


by [Mongabay](#)

- There is fear that oil exploitation will lead to widespread soil, groundwater, and surface stream contamination.
- The government claims to have organized a free, prior and informed consultation, but critics disagree.
- The Sápara say they are ready to follow the Sarayaku example and bring their case to national and international courts in order to avoid the drilling of blocks 79 and 83.

The Ecuadorian government has signed two contracts with the China-based Andes Petroleum consortium, to work on the oil blocks known as 79 and 83; blocks that overlap with the territory of the Sápara indigenous people.



*Oil blocks 79 and 83 in Sápara territory. Mapa courtesy of Amazon Watch.*

Indigenous leaders from across Ecuador have been coming together in recent years, as oil exploration has ramped up in the Amazon region where many of them live. Last week, they united once again to oppose yet another oil deal that, they say, threatens the existence of the ancestral communities living in the province of Pastaza, located in the easternmost Amazon

region of Ecuador, about 300 kilometers southeast of Quito.

Late last month, the Ecuadorian government signed two contracts with China National Petroleum (CNPC) and China Petrochemical Corporation (SINOPEC), both part of the Andes Petroleum consortium, to work on the oil blocks known as 79 and 83; areas that overlap with the territory of the Sápara indigenous people.

Located between the Pindoyacu, Conambo, and Corrientes rivers, the Sápara territory occupies approximately 361,00 hectares of tropical rainforest, with a population of no more than 600 people. The Sápara live sustainably within their territory known for its diversity and abundance of medicinal plants, and they fear oil exploitation will lead to widespread soil, groundwater, and surface stream contamination.

Manari Ushigua, president of the Sápara Nation of Ecuador warns against oil extraction destroying their rainforest, their mountains and contaminating the water, all of them key resources for their survival. "Without these elements we cannot say we are Sápara because our knowledge, our language, our history are spoken through these elements we have in our territory," Ushigua told Mongabay.

Ushigua said he firmly disregarded this new business agreement, especially because his community had not been consulted about these deals. In accordance to Article 57 of the country's Constitution –and to the U.N Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), to which Ecuador became a signatory in 2007– the government is required to organize a free, prior and informed consultation to obtain the consent of the communities before any drilling activity is contemplated.

The government claims to have done so, but many critics disagree, adding that any type of consultation only happened amongst the indigenous groups who happened to be in favor of the oil deals. Belén Páez, from Pachamama Alliance Ecuador, said those who have agreed are believed to be linked to the government.

"The people involved with blocks 79 and 83 haven't been rightfully consulted," Páez told Mongabay. "This [the consultation] should be the avenue to have a talk with the state, by granting their rights."

During a recent press conference held in Quito, leaders from the Kichwa Sarayaku, Achuar, Shiwiar and Shuar Amazon communities showed their support and joined the Sápara resistance against the contracts signed by the government, alongside two of the largest indigenous confederations in the country.

The new \$72 million deal establishes a period of exploration of four years, followed by a 20-year period of drilling, according to a press release published on the Ministry of Strategic Sectors' website. "You can see that the millions of dollars of debt that Ecuador is having to pay back are forcing the expansion of the oil frontier in the Ecuadorian Amazon," said Adam Zuckerman, Environmental and Human Rights Campaigner for Amazon Watch. Ecuador received \$4 billion in loans from China within a few weeks the contracts were signed.

"Those investments that normally wouldn't make sense, neither for people in Quito and Guayaquil, or people in the Amazon, are moving forward because of a lot of the conditions within this contracts are tied to future oil sales," Zuckerman told Mongabay. The exploration phase will determine the amount of oil to be drilled but the overall investment for the area represents USD 72 million.

Critics are worried that this process could cause a violent confrontation amongst different members of the community. "For the Sápara, the conflicts this has caused amongst their people are one of the most harmful aspects of the oil round," said Zuckerman. "It is not just about the contamination and the loss of their sovereignty but also about the loss of harmony amongst community members."

The Sápara were recognized by the UNESCO as an "Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity" because of the critical situation of their community, which is made up by 575 people of whom only five still speak the Sápara language. But now the Sápara are afraid they could disappear all along.

This isn't the first time that an Ecuadorean indigenous community fights the state over their position on oil drilling. Back in December 2003, the Kichwa Sarayaku filed a lawsuit against the Ecuadorian government at the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACHR). The Sarayaku blamed the state for the effects of oil activities in their territory, conducted in the 1990's; activities the Sarayaku said they were not consulted about.

The people of Sarayaku said the oil activities had a negative impact on their land, ways of life, development, social peace and integrity, and environment as well.



*Sápara indigenous leaders meet in Quito to protest government plans to drill oil in their territory. Photo courtesy of Isabel Riofrio.*

In June 2012, the court found the state responsible for violating rights of the community, their ancestral lands and cultural identity, for not granting effective legal protection, and for having placed their life and personal integrity in danger in the presence of seismic explosives within their territory. The state was forced to pay the Sarayaku \$1.4 million and was asked to remove the explosives buried in the Sarayaku territory during the exploration phase of the oil contract. Indigenous leaders say that this last part hasn't been done yet.

Now the Sápara say they are ready to follow the Sarayaku example and bring their case to national and international courts in order to avoid the drilling of blocks 79 and 83. The community is alert, Ushigua said, and ready to prevent the entrance of Andes Petroleum into their territory.

"The oil will remain underground, that is our message. And with that intention, we are going to fight until the end, no matter what happens," Ushigua told Mongabay. "We are going to resist."