

# Colombia - U'wa

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## Profile

The U'wa are an indigenous group comprising around 6,000 people. They are distributed among 22 communities and live in the departments of Northern and Southern Santander, Boyaca, Casanare, and Arauca, extending up until the Colombian border with Venezuela. Descendants of the U'wa, known as the Pedraza can also be found living in Venezuela and these are thought to number some 100 people (Actualidad Etnica, 2007). Historically the U'wa ancestral territory covered an area of some 1.4 million hectares of land. Today however, this territory has been vastly reduced amounting to 200,000 hectares or 14% of what they previously possessed (Actualidad Etnica, Special report, 2007).

The U'wa have a deeply spiritual and holistic world view in which their existence as a people is integral and deeply tied to the forces of nature and the earth. The U'wa believe in *Sira*, the father creator of the world who is the ultimate guardian of 'mother earth'. According to the U'wa worldview, mother earth was a treasure given by *Sira* to the U'wa and all of humankind, to be cultivated for their sustenance and survival. It is believed that *Sira* will be made angry by any human acts which violate the integrity of mother earth, including those which seek to exploit her to reap economic rewards. It is believed that *Sira* will punish such acts and that punishment will manifest itself through natural phenomenon such as earthquakes, hurricanes, floods and darkness (Actualidad Etnica, 2007).

## Historical context

The U'wa peoples are perhaps one of Colombia's most well-known indigenous groups, who became internationally visible in the late 1990s for their successful political mobilization against the exploitation of fossil fuels in their ancestral territories by the American multinational oil giant, Occidental Petroleum. Through their campaign known as "Oxy No, U'wa Si", in which

they collectively threatened to commit mass suicide if Occidental did not withdraw from their lands, the U'wa were able to win the support of important sectors of national and international public opinion.

Historically the U'wa have been a highly politicized and united community who have always put up a strong resistance against external forces threatening their culture and existence as a people.

According to the Colombian anthropologist and lawyer, Francisco Salazar who for many years lived among the U'wa people, they have had a violent experience in their contact with white outsiders, including the Spanish colonists (Actualidad Etnica, Special report, 2007).

Between 1635 and 1650 the U'wa developed a resistance movement in the region of Servita, which is now the department of Santander. In the end the U'wa were forced to abandon their territories and flee to the mountains of the Serrania de los Ynfielos' protesting that they would never be conquered. For the next 200 years the U'wa took refuge in the mountains, which protected them from Spanish domination and extermination due to the difficult and rugged terrain (ibid).

During the modern era of the independent republic at times when the U'wa have felt a great sense of threat to their existence they have resorted to collective suicide. This mass renunciation of life in the face of the loss of their last refuge on earth is thought to be an act of resistance, and a decision to follow the destiny of mother nature, rather than to continue living and play witness her agony.

## Current issues

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Despite the successes of the late 1990s in halting the oil prospecting activities of Occidental Petroleum and Gas corporation, the U'wa are currently experiencing a similar situation of vulnerability because the state-owned petroleum company ECOPETROL intends to carry out oil exploration on ancestral territories in the zones of Siriri and Catleya, in the region of Sarere.

Unlike their previous campaign in the 1990s which charged Occidental petroleum with failing to carry out prior consultation with the community, this time the U'wa are steadfast in their refusal to engage in this process with ECOPETROL. This decision taken by the U'wa is based on their belief that the worldviews of both parties with regards to what constitutes human development; well being and prosperity are inherently incompatible and conflicting. The examples presented by the cases of other indigenous communities who participated in the process but whose demands were not respected, leading to the eventual loss of their territories, is also cited as a reason for the U'was non-participation (Actualidad etnica, 2007)

The Colombian State reiterates its commitment to multiculturalism and the need to protect the rights of its ethnic minority communities while at the same time balancing the national interest. But the U'was and other commentators believe that the decision on whether to prospect for oil

in U'wa territory or not, has already been taken, and that the proposed process of previous consultation put forward by the government is a mere formality which it needs to undertake in order to remain in compliance with the law.

According to Hector Mondragon, the reality is that the recent restructuring of energy policy as a condition of Plan Colombia has meant that the government has transferred the country's fossil fuel resources into the hands of international private capital and is under great pressure to grant them access and meet investor demands. The urgent need to expand Colombia's oil exports and its derivatives is based on the government's desire to close the impending fiscal deficit caused by such policies. As such argues Mondragon, it is highly contestable for the government to justify oil exploration on U'wa territory as being to promote the national interest, as current energy policy and recently modified laws, reflects the opposite. Pressure to exploit resources on U'wa territory also comes as a result of military and political pressures. The government seeks to deploy troops on the Venezuelan border and is impeded from carrying out oil exploration in other parts of the country due to the armed conflict (Actualidad Etnica, Special Report).

In January 2007 the U'wa released a communiqué in which it denounced the unlawful incursion of oil prospecting machinery into U'wa territory and intimidating overhead flights of aeroplanes and helicopters paid for with the funds of Plan Colombia, which caused psychological harm to the community.

The U'wa condemn the incursions into their ancestral territory by the government as being arbitrary and unconstitutional since although in February 2006 the Council of State demanded that the objections and observations presented by the U'wa with regards to oil prospecting on their lands should be taken into account. But to date the government has not given an official reply, but continues to interfere nevertheless in their territories.

The U'wa go on to call on the government to return the land titles granted to them in 1802 by the colonial crown and state their intention to approach international human rights bodies such as the Interamerican Commission for Human Rights of the Organisation of American States, and the International Criminal Court believing that they have sufficient evidence to back up a case defending their right to life and the protection of the environment.