



Clothes are draped to dry over an oil pipe near Shushufindi, in southeast Ecuador. Texaco began drilling in the area more than 30 years ago

THE AMAZON'S DIRTY WAR

In the Ecuadorean Amazon basin our thirst for oil has triggered an eco-disaster: wholesale pollution and catastrophic cancer rates. And a bloody turf war has broken out. Ecuador is taking a survival plan to the Copenhagen Climate Change Conference. But will western governments listen? Christine Toomey reports. Photographs: Juan Diego Perez Arias

ever handed down in an environmental case.

A few miles east of Coca lies the village of San Carlos. Most who live here came to the area in the 1970s to farm along routes cut through the rainforest as oil exploration began. There is little forest left now and little productive farming. Much of the land in this region that stretches north to the border with Colombia was long ago contaminated by millions of gallons of toxic waste, gas and crude oil released untreated into the environment. Most of the inhabitants have depended for decades on contaminated drinking water from polluted rivers and streams. Rates of cancer of all kinds are nearly four times higher than in areas where there is no oil drilling. The incidence of other illnesses such as skin and bone disease, respiratory and digestive problems and spontaneous abortions are also far higher. Most of the people living here have been dependent for decades on contaminated drinking water taken directly from polluted rivers and streams.

Beatrice Mainaguez cradles a photograph of her younger sister Maria, who died of uterine cancer three years ago aged 35. She talks of the “bitter pain” of watching her grow thinner and thinner before she died. Maria, a mother of five, had lived in San Carlos since she was an infant. Her family took their drinking water from a creek that ran close to one of the many oil wells Texaco sank in and around San Carlos in the 1970s and ‘80s. It was not until four years ago that the family

LAND THAT APPEARS GREEN MOVES UNNERVINGLY UNDERFOOT. YOU SIMPLY FIND LAKES OF BLACK SLUDGE IF YOU POKE A STICK THROUGH THE GRASS

shack was connected to mains water, and eight months ago to electricity.

A short distance away, Orlando Molina hugs his daughters Sofia, 15, and Yuri, 17, who squirm with embarrassment as he asks them to roll up their trouser legs to show me the bone deformities both were born with.

Orlando says doctors told him the deformities were likely to have been caused by their mothers’ milk being leached of nutrients because she drank water that had drained through soil contaminated by spills from the Texaco wells. His extended family used to live on a coffee farm within a few hundred feet of a Texaco facility on the outskirts of San Carlos that was subsequently taken over by the state company Petroecuador. Both his parents died of stomach cancer, his sister of breast cancer and a brother of prostate cancer.

Orlando spent most of the \$4,500 Petroecuador eventually gave him for gobbling up his small landholding on medical treatment to help straighten his daughter’s legs. With the \$1,200 left over he bought a two-room wooden shack where his family of six now live.

“Sixty-five per cent of the population around here are suffering from respiratory and gastric problems, skin disease and other illnesses,” says Rosa Moreno, a nurse who has been in the San Carlos area for 25 years. “We don’t have any

specialist doctors to diagnose them properly or analyse the causes. But to anyone who lives round here it’s obvious that the problems are related to pollution caused by the oil companies.”

Walk anywhere near these waste pits and you still sink ankle-deep in tar. Other stretches of land that appear green move unnervingly underfoot; poke a stick through the grass and you simply find lakes of black sludge.

Last year a team of engineers, doctors and biologists submitted a court-ordered report, which concluded that Texaco had polluted streams and drinking water across an area of nearly 2,000 square miles, and caused 2,091 cases of cancer, leading to 1,401 deaths between 1985 and 1998. Chevron’s lawyers say the area’s health problems are caused only by poverty and poor sanitation.

Faced with the possibility of losing the legal battle and having to pay staggering levels of compensation, the company has now made moves to argue before an international court of arbitration in the Hague that the case against the oil companies in Ecuador has been unfair. The outcome is still uncertain: the judge in Ecuador is not due to hand down his judgment until next year.

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So far only Germany has made a concrete effort to support Correa’s plan, offering to donate \$50m a year for the next decade — on condition that an international trust fund be set up into which donor countries would pay money. All donors would

receive “Yasuni bonds” guaranteeing that their contributions would be returned, with interest, if Ecuador were ever to tap the protected oil reserves. Spain, France and Italy have also expressed interest by cancelling debts owed by Ecuador. The British government has not yet been formally approached, but when Correa’s advisers were due to meet MPs earlier this year to discuss the plan, they were told that our parliamentarians were too busy dealing with the expenses scandal.

Correa has made it clear that if he does not get backing for his plan, he will be forced to allow further drilling in Yasuni. “Climate change has been produced principally by the rich countries,” he has said, “and they have a duty to take responsibility for that. What we are proposing is a constructive way to redress the imbalance and stop further polluting of the planet.”

The entire Amazon region is the largest green lung in the world. Its trees and plants produce one-fifth of the Earth’s oxygen and absorb as much CO₂ every year as is created by the burning of fossil fuels in the entire EU. Preserving the natural environment in this area is a key element of the fight against global warming.

The bloodbath among the locals must also come to an end: the Zavala family were innocents swept up in the thirst for oil.

But is anyone really listening? ■

MUST TRY HARDER

The Labour government started well enough. But now its policies are half-hearted, and progress, especially in transport, is at a standstill. Richard Girling issues a stern end-of-term report

We have seen the future, said new Labour in 1997, and the future is green. Unhappily, the future was also Gordon. For a while it looked okay. Even the Treasury, it seemed, might have a green glint in its eye. Ambitious targets were set, notably a 20% cut in CO₂ emissions, from a 1990 baseline, by 2010 (a target that will be missed by a wide margin). But what followed was 10 years when green taxes went down, not up. Carbon emissions went up, not down.

The problem with environmental policies is that they take a long time to deliver. Transport is the classic example. Motorists and, especially, the haulage industry have a vast capacity for rage, and ministers who block the road soon run into trouble.

Blair-Brown inherited the Tory ‘fuel duty escalator’, which raised fuel tax by at least 5% above inflation annually. In his first budget, Brown whacked on an immediate 9.3% and jacked up the escalator to 6%. More good things followed in 1999, including the Climate Change Levy, which taxed businesses on the energy they used. But that was pretty much the limit of Gordon’s greenery. The fuel

escalator was scrapped in November 1999, and the fuel-tax protests that blocked the refineries in 2000 were followed by a cut in 2001.

In the same year, differential rates of vehicle excise duty (VED) were introduced, based on engine size and, later, on carbon output. The very smallest and cleanest city cars, in Band A, pay no VED at all. The biggest emitters, in Band M, pay £405. But Friends of the Earth reckons it would take a top rate of at least £2,000 to have a significant effect on carbon emissions.

In the 10 years from 1997, UK traffic rose by more than 11%. Since 1980, vehicle emissions have grown by 54%, now accounting for 24% of the national total. In real terms motoring has dropped in cost by more than 8%, while bus and rail fares have risen by 17% and 7% respectively. Policy on air transport is equally perverse. The

warming effect of a tonne of CO₂ from a jet is equivalent to between two and four tonnes burnt on the ground. Yet there are plans to expand Heathrow, Stansted and Birmingham airports, and though Air



WHAT IS THE REST OF THE WORLD DOING?

DELHI: BAN ON PLASTIC BAGS

Earlier this year, India’s capital awoke to headlines announcing five-year jail sentences or stiff fines for using polythene bags. The ban will be enforced gently at first to allow a switch to cotton, recycled-paper or compostable bags.

ISTANBUL: SPEEDY BUSES

One of the most congested, polluted bridges in Turkey, the six-lane First Bosphorus Bridge in Istanbul could take three hours to cross until Bus Rapid Transport got its own section this year. The ride now takes 25 minutes, and 800,000 passengers a day are expected.

FRANCE: PLANES TO TRAINS

Reports suggest France is phasing out planes in favour of more high-speed trains. In 2007, a decision was taken to create another 2,000 kilometres of high-speed tracks by 2020. Flight data for 2009 show a 3% drop in passenger numbers, partly as a result of new rail lines.

MALDIVES: GOING GREEN

This year plans were announced to make the Maldivian islands the world’s first carbon-neutral country by 2020. Solar panels, wind turbines and biomass will replace fossil fuels.

CHICAGO: ECO-FRIENDLY LIGHTS

Five years ago Chicago fitted LED lights in all city traffic lights. The move cuts energy use by 85%, saving \$2.55m in energy bills, \$100,000 in materials and 23,000 tonnes of CO₂ a year.



PARIS: GREEN CYCLING

In July 2007, 10,000 pearl-grey Velibs were released city-wide for public use. The 24/7 cycle-hire scheme, the largest in the world, logged 1m rides in 18 days. Paris now has 20,000 Velibs — and the idea is spreading.

