
Peru and Ecuador: the oil is poisoning indigenous lands and peoples. Among the general silence, the voice of the Church is heard

The whole world saw it: the oil slick - 12 thousand barrels - that leaked a few months ago from the Repsol refinery in Ventanilla, not far from Lima, Peru, caused an ecological catastrophe of immense proportions. The Organization of American States has also been dealing with the disaster, which polluted many kilometers of coastline as well as the sea, compromising the livelihoods of local fishermen. On the other hand, the oil that for years has been steadily leaking from the pipelines that carry crude oil from the fields in the Amazon region is invisible. It is going on in the interior areas of Peru, but also in neighboring Ecuador. In this case, the oil does not seep into an ocean, but into rivers and lands, ruining the lives of indigenous people, who are literally being poisoned. "They are being abused with spills worse than what we experienced on the Peruvian coast," **Msgr. Carlos Castillo** of Lima said on the occasion of the second anniversary of the apostolic exhortation "Querida Amazonia." And the numbers confirm it. "Indeed, much of the oil spills happen in the Amazon zone, amid general silence. Over 24 years, there have been more than a thousand oil spills in the country; in the last four years, more than 87 thousand barrels of oil have ended up on the ground or in the water. Those most affected are the indigenous peoples, it is an outrage". So says **Miguel Lévano Muñoz**, Oxfam's programs liaison in Peru and coordinator of the oil spills working group of the National Coordination for Human Rights. **Obsolete pipes are leaking in the Peruvian Amazon.** In Peru as in Ecuador, only the Church is raising its voice: bishops and missionaries are speaking out alongside the indigenous peoples. The incident that occurred in the Loreto region last January 22, during the same period as the Pacific spill was of particular concern: the rupture of the North Peruvian pipeline operated by Petroperú, near the village of Nueva Alianza, inhabited mostly by the indigenous peoples of the Kukama and Yurimaguas ethnic groups. Other spills have occurred in recent weeks, most recently in the Barranca district of Datem del Marañón province, in May. The constant incidents, along with Petroperú's downplaying of what happened, are causing an outcry from the bishop of the apostolic vicariate of Iquitos, Msgr. **Miguel Cadenas**, an Augustinian like most of the missionaries in the area, who explained to SIR that "the oil business in the Loreto region is turning fifty this year, there have been countless spills and no one has done anything about it. The pipeline is obsolete, the pipes should be changed. Only the small community of Nueva Alianza, located at the confluence of río Urituyacu on río Marañón, one of the branches that form the Amazon River, has suffered six major spills in recent years, the most serious of which happened in 2016." The bishop goes on to explain that for years, Petroperú relied on local resources to manage the pipelines, and the result was that often "the structures were damaged by the inspectors themselves, in order to obtain money for later repairs." Then, in 2017, the oil company's policy changed, but management remains lacking. Msgr. Cadenas warns that "the situation is having a brutal impact on the environment, the local population is often left without drinking water, and some are drinking contaminated water." Church complaints are not heard or are downplayed. "There are similar situations in other apostolic vicariates in the Amazon," the vicar apostolic continues. "More coordination work among us would be necessary; we need to do some self-criticism. I am worried, because among the local populations violence could erupt at any moment." **Ecuador, 1,000 spills in 10 years.** Moving on to Ecuador, to the apostolic vicariate of Aguarico (Orellana and Sucumbíos provinces), there is a river here too, the Rio Coca, a tributary of the Rio Napo, which in turn flows into the Amazon. Here, too, there are constant oil spills. And here, too, there is a bishop sounding the alarm unheeded by the authorities: Capuchin bishop Msgr. **José Adalberto Jiménez Mendoza**, "We are talking about 1,000 spills in the last 10 years, although the institutions are scrambling to make this phenomenon invisible", he says. The most serious episode took place two years ago, with an estimated spill of 30,000 barrels, although authorities only acknowledged a total of 15,600 barrels. Usually, these episodes are justified by claiming that they were the result of fate, the latest example

being when there was a landslide while pipes were being repaired, which caused a spillage of 6-7 thousand barrels already. In reality, it is caused by irresponsibility, mainly due to the fact that many facilities were built in volcanic, unstable areas." The environmental and economic damage is severe: "The water is polluted, the soil itself is losing its productive capacity. Species such as bufeos, the famous pink freshwater dolphins, are at risk." Not to mention reparations, which were also called for in a recent letter written by [Repam](#), the Panamanian Ecclesial Network: "Farmers and indigenous people are being delivered 8 liters of water, some food, a few dollars. All this is happening with the complicit silence of multinational corporations, the government, and even local governments." Oil spills are not the only form of pollution. "In the province of Sucumbíos, oil wells are still burning" despite last year's historic ruling, when the Multi-Competent Chamber of the Sucumbíos Provincial Court of Justice upheld the appeal lodged by nine girls and ruled in favor of the protective court action, undertaken with the goal of eliminating "gas flaring" in the area's oil industry. This is a practice through which natural gas that escapes along with oil from wells is burned. "It was a legal victory, but in light of the ruling, we will begin to see its effects starting in 2030," concluded Msgr. Jiménez dejectedly, while also lamenting the increase in legal and illegal open-pit mining. "And on these matters, the only voice that is being raised is that of the Apostolic vicariate. Us bishops cannot be neutral about this." *journalist at "La Vita Del Popolo"

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