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## ***Oil Comes First in Peru, Not Coronavirus Danger, Not Indigenous Rights***



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As of July 7, 10,772 people had died of COVID 19 infection in Peru, which is the 8<sup>th</sup> most severely affected country in the world. The actual toll is probably far greater, especially in Peru's Amazonian region. Indigenous inhabitants there, isolated from medical care, suffer from the pandemic and from an environment poisoned by oil extraction.

Canadian oil company Frontera Energy had operated an oxygen-producing plant at in Shiviyaçu, located near Peru's northern border with Ecuador. At a meeting June 26 with government officials, the company announced it would shut the plant down. Represented

at the meeting was PetroPeru, the state -owned company whose NorPeruano pipeline conveys Frontier Energy's crude oil to refineries on the Pacific coast.

Peru's metallurgical and mining industries produce and use most of the oxygen used in Peru. But indigenous communities are apparently seeking that industrial oxygen be made available for treating COVID 19 infection. They denounced Frontera Energy's decision as a violation of human rights.

The drama plays out in Block 192, in Loreto department. There Frontera Energy produces almost 20 percent of Peru's oil; it enjoys exclusive extraction rights.

Indigenous communities have been protesting "large exposure to toxic materials and the disproportionate impact on specific groups of the population." Over the last five years, the company allegedly was responsible for at least 80 major oil spill-overs, six of them since February. Indigenous peoples have expressed concern that waste material and toxins will remain after oil extraction in Loreto is finished.

In fact, oil reserves in Loreto are almost depleted, and the situation there is volatile. Frontera Energy itself is no rock of stability, having emerged in 2017 out of the post-default reorganization of its predecessor, Pacific Exploration & Production. That entity was the former Pacific Rubiales Energy Corporation, notable for ties to paramilitaries, violations of labor rights, and stock manipulation.

With operations in Colombia Ecuador, Guyana, and Peru, Frontera Energy currently registers a gross annual revenue of \$1.68 billion and net income of minus \$189 million.

The company is refusing to produce oxygen in Shivityacu as long as oil-production facilities are being sabotaged – presumably by indigenous activists. PetroPeru reports "26 incidents along the aging 1,100 km pipeline since early 2016, with 19 caused by some form of sabotage." In late 2018, the NorPeruano pipeline and Frontera Energy's oil installations were temporarily closed – one of many times – after indigenous groups kidnapped and quickly released 20 oil workers.

Indigenous activists have long demanded that the government take responsibility for the oil company's abuse of the environment. They've blocked roads and met with government and company officials. Along the way, their communities have demanded basic health services. A "high-level commission" in November 2017 acceded.

Aurelio Chino, president of an indigenous federation, in September 2019 complained that, "when we mobilize, they brand us as terrorists, as savages." Indeed, "We may be natives or indigenous, [but] we are not animals, the government has to understand that."

Speaking of his people's exposure to heavy metals – documented in a recent Health Ministry report – Chino called for hospital services and clean-up of oil spills.

Indigenous demonstrators in January, 2020 threatened to occupy a pumping and electrical-generation station in Andoas in Loreto. They eventually did so, and Frontera Energy closed the station on May 1. This was the situation when, on June 21, communities in the same area demanded that Frontera Energy re-open its oxygen-producing plant. They regard the pandemic as a “death sentence.”

In refusing, the company demanded documents “with signatures” showing that the communities would “guarantee operations without restrictions or blockades.” The indigenous see the requirement as an attempt “to use the oxygen plant [as a means] to impose control over the communities' discontent.”

Peru's extreme shortage of medical oxygen needed for treating COVID 19 infection aggravates the conflict. That shortage is a scandal.

Only two companies produce medical oxygen in Peru. Some is imported from Ecuador. Family members seeking oxygen for hospitalized relatives must stand in long lines to buy fresh tanks or refill old ones. With the pandemic advancing, prices paid by families rose from \$259 to \$1,799 per tank. A local diocese of the Catholic Church and a Spanish actor have raised money to fund oxygen-generating machines for Loreto.

Metallurgical engineers called upon Peruvian President Martin Vizcarra to facilitate the use of industrial oxygen for treating COVID 19 infection. Their June 15 letter expressed regret at the president's neglect of an earlier one. They assured him that gas in tanks used by industry contained at least 93 percent oxygen and that making them available would be a good way for the government to respond to the pandemic.

Anarchy thus plays out in one small Peruvian cockpit. Strife overflows as implacable forces collide. They are: a precariously positioned multinational corporation desperate to preserve assets, communities of victimized indigenous peoples who resist, and globalized capitalism intent upon wealth accumulation at the cost of human needs.

Events in Loreto suggest a society in shambles. Preparations for the pandemic were at best inadequate, at worst non-existent. The situations of Cuba, China, and Vietnam are different. Governed by Communist parties, they succeeded in protecting their people from “CoronaShock” – as documented here.

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