

Reprisal comes after the group's public defense of Shuar indigenous peoples in conflict over Chinese copper mine

WASHINGTON - Ecuador's Environment Ministry announced yesterday its intention to shutter Acción Ecológica, the country's leading grassroots environmental organization. The move is a clear reprisal to the group's efforts to raise awareness about environmental and indigenous rights concerns over a planned mega-copper mine on the lands of the Shuar indigenous people in the southern Ecuadorian Amazon. Then yesterday evening the national police raided the offices of the Shuar federation, FICSH, detaining its president, Agustín Wachapa.

"We reject the assertion of the Ministry of the Environment that we have violated national law," said Acción Ecológica in a statement released after the announcement. "We have been scrupulous in our compliance with the law, and our actions are in full harmony with [the government's] National Plan for Good Living 2013-2017," which calls for participatory management of the country's environmental treasures like the Amazon.

Nonetheless, a government memo advocating for the closure – obtained by Acción Ecológica – cites the group's awareness-raising efforts about "the serious environmental impacts and the ecosystem that would result from the extractive activity" in the Cordillera del Condor – the location of the Chinese mining operation – "and to the violation of the rights of indigenous communities living in this area." In its closure notification, the government goes so far as to claim that Acción Ecológica has violated the Constitution by allegedly straying from its mission.

Acción Ecológica began sounding the alarm about likely rights violations occurring since last week as a conflict between the Shuar community of Nankints, the government, and EXSA intensified. The situation escalated after the forced removal of Shuar families from their ancestral territory to make way for the mining operations that were initiated without prior consultation with the community, as stipulated by international norms and jurisprudence and despite the fact that the Shuar had requested dialogue about the project on multiple occasions in previous months. Nankints and the surrounding area are now under a state of emergency and heavily militarized.

"The government is trying to shutter Acción Ecológica for doing its job," said Kevin Koenig, Ecuador Program Director with Amazon Watch. "This is a witch hunt which illustrates the

Correa administration's rollback of rights for civil society and indigenous peoples."

The heightened tensions resulting from the state of emergency have also spilled over into neighboring Amazonian provinces. On Monday, the Kichwa of Sarayaku in Pastaza province, who have publicly declared support for the Shuar and called for dialogue, intercepted 11 soldiers traveling unexpectedly through their ancestral territory, in order to investigate the soldiers' presence. After talks with the governor of Pastaza and the Brigade commander, the soldiers were peacefully and safely released to Ecuadorian authorities, yet the government now claims Sarayaku kidnapped the soldiers and has reportedly fired the governor.

The government gave Acción Ecológica 24 hours to offer a response to the closure order and ten days to present detailed evidence on the charges against it. In its statement Acción Ecológica said, "we will continue to defend the rights of both humans and nature."

The action against Acción Ecológica is not the first time the administration of Rafael Correa has sought to dissolve the organization. In a 2009 attempt to shut it down, the administration similarly argued that the group had veered away from its registered organizational mission. The government had to reverse course after evidence provided by Acción Ecológica call the government's bluff, as well as due to significant national and international outcry.

The Correa administration did successfully shut down the environmental organization Fundacion Pachamama in 2013 after it supported a protest denouncing new oil concessions on indigenous lands in the country's southern Amazon region.

Acción Ecológica celebrated its 30th anniversary this year, and is largely responsible for the country's modern environmental movement. On issues ranging from resource extraction, climate change, GMOs, deforestation, free trade, ecological debt, and globalization, Acción Ecológica has been an instrumental and outspoken voice in shaping environmental policy and corporate accountability in Ecuador and beyond. It was the founding member of Oilwatch, a south-to-south network of resistance to oil activities in tropical countries, and was one of the first groups to explicitly make the call to Keep It In The Ground, which has become a worldwide movement and scientific mandate to keep fossil fuels in the ground.

Many of the Correa administration's landmark environmental initiatives actually originated with

Acción Ecológica, like the the 2007 Yasuni-ITT initiative, which sought to keep close to a billion barrels of crude in the ground underneath Yasuni National Park in exchange for financial contributions equaling half of the country's forgone revenue. After Correa pulled the plug on the initiative and approved drilling, the group spearheaded the formation of Yasunidos, a national grassroots collective that gathered over 750,000 signatures to force a vote on drilling plans in Yasuni. And the groundbreaking inclusion of the Rights of Nature in the country's 2008 Constitution, which constitutionally enshrined the rights of mother nature, would not have happened without the organization's work.

###

Amazon Watch is a nonprofit organization founded in 1996 to protect the rainforest and advance the rights of indigenous peoples in the Amazon Basin. We partner with indigenous and environmental organizations in campaigns for human rights, corporate accountability and the preservation of the Amazon's ecological systems.