

## Huaorani

### Profile

Huaorani people have lived as forest hunters and gatherers in the heart of the Ecuadorian Amazon for hundreds of years. Numbering approximately 1,300, the Huaorani are a relatively isolated indigenous group inhabiting the eastern Amazonian region of Ecuador. From their tragic encounter with North American missionaries in 1956 to this day, they have held a special place in journalistic and popular imagination as 'Ecuador's last savages'. Despite the 'civilizing' efforts of missionaries, the Huaorani have largely retained their distinctive way of apprehending the world and continue to be known as skilled warriors.

### Historical context

The successful claim made in 1990 by the lowland Huaorani to 600,000 hectares of territory was subject to the condition that they would not interfere with oil companies drilling there. As part of the government's strategy for developing resources even in restricted areas, the Maxus Energy Oil Company, whose claim lies within a national park of great biological diversity, was given permission to construct a pipeline and a narrow access road. Oil exploration paired with increases in lumbering activities and tourism has caused some Huaorani to retreat further into the jungle.

In 1991, in the wake of receiving territorial rights from the government after a protracted international campaign, young schooled men formed the ONHAE (Organization of the Huaorani Nation of Amazonian Ecuador). This organization now operates almost entirely under the auspices of Maxus, the company presently exploiting petroleum in the Huaorani territory and the Yasuni National Park.

### Current issues

Encouraged by missionaries, some Huaorani have given up their traditional economic activities and have turned to the lumber industry for their livelihood. This has posed a serious threat to neighboring tribes. In 2003 a group of Huaorani working in lumbering attacked a neighboring Tagaeri-Taromenani indigenous village, killing 26 people. Because this sub-group of the Huaorani has had very little contact with outsiders, this massacre was condemned even in the international sphere. Although the Huaorani are estimated to be in the thousands, certain sub-groups like the Taromenani are in danger of extinction.

Caught between the conflicting objectives of petroleum development and forest conservation, they are confronted with pernicious and contradictory economic and political interests. The Huaorani continue to be threatened by oil extraction and illegal lumbering. In 2005, despite protests by Huaorani people, the Brazilian oil company, Petrobrás, continued to drill for oil in the Yasuní forest of Ecuador. Although the media reported that the Huaorani broke their agreement with Petrobrás, Huaorani leaders argued that the president of the Organization of the Huaorani Nationality signed the contract without consulting the Huaorani community. Also, eco-tourism is on the rise in this region, however tourism operators rarely consult the Huaorani before bringing outsiders into their communities.