

# Rachel's Environment & Health News

## #642 - Indigenous Rights Activists Murdered

March 17, 1999

Three American human rights activists were murdered March 5 in northeastern Arauca province in Colombia, South America, where they had traveled at the invitation of the U'wa people. Since 1992 the U'wa have been locked in a life-and-death struggle to protect their homelands against oil drilling by Occidental Petroleum of Bakersfield, California. Various environmental and indigenous peoples' organizations from North America have been supporting the 8,000 U'wa in their efforts to repel, by peaceful means, the invasion of the oil giants. (See <http://uwa.moles.-org/> [omit the hyphen].)

Ingrid Washinawatok, 41, a Menominee from Keshena, Wisconsin was a well-known indigenous leader in the U.S. She was co-chairperson of the Indigenous Women's Network, headquartered in Rapid City, South Dakota. [1] She and her murdered companions, Lahe'ena'e Gay, 39, an indigenous leader from Hawaii,[2] and Terence Freitas, 24, a biologist and California native, were visiting the U'wa people in the Andes mountains to plan an education system to help the U'wa retain their culture in the face of growing pressure from outsiders.

The three Americans were abducted at gunpoint February 25 while driving to a provincial airport to fly home. Eight days later, on March 5, their bodies were found bound, blindfolded, and riddled with bullets. Initially it was not clear who had kidnapped the three activists,[3] but on March 10 the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) acknowledged that one of their field commanders had perpetrated the crime. (See <http://burn.ucsd.edu/~farc-ep/communic.htm>; omit the hyphen.) With 7000 troops in battle dress, FARC is the largest armed group waging civil war against the Colombian government.

The NEW YORK TIMES reported March 11 (pg. A10) that Raul Reyes, a FARC spokesperson, said, "Commander Gildardo of the FARC's 10th Front found that strangers had entered the Uwa Indian region and did not have authorization from the guerrillas. He improvised an investigation, captured, and executed them without consulting his superiors." FARC has refused to turn over the murderers to Colombian or U.S. authorities but said they would be "sanctioned" in keeping with FARC's code of revolutionary justice. According to the Associated Press, Reyes said the guilty parties may face the death penalty, and he said FARC "requested forgiveness from indigenous peoples around the world." [4]

The backdrop for these murders -- the big picture -- is that the U.S. has depleted its domestic oil reserves and is now aggressively drilling for oil in Latin America and elsewhere. As the WASHINGTON POST summarized it in 1991, "Big Oil is heading south -- or east or north, or anywhere, so long as it's outside the United States. At an accelerating pace, the major U.S.-based oil companies are shipping their exploration and development capital overseas. Tens of billions of dollars that once would have been spent to drill wells or build refineries in the United States are being earmarked for foreign operations." [5]

In 1992, Occidental Petroleum formed a consortium with Shell Oil (see REHW #546) and the Colombian government. The consortium planned to explore for oil beneath the homelands of the U'wa people, a plan that Colombia's Supreme Court later said violated the constitution that Colombia had adopted in 1991. The U'wa call themselves "the thinking people" and so far -- through successful law suits, publicity, and organizing opposition in North America -- they have outmaneuvered the oil companies and their supporters in the Colombian government. No oil drilling has begun on U'wa land, though Occidental still insists it intends to begin drilling at the earliest opportunity. The U'wa have threatened mass suicide if drilling begins.

Besides the U'wa, three separate revolutionary groups that are fighting to overthrow the Colombian government are also opposing oil development. Their techniques include kidnapping, murder, and frequent use of high explosives -- techniques also employed by a

string of U.S.- supported Colombian governments.[6]

The Indigenous Women's Network issued a statement March 8th, before FARC's leadership acknowledged responsibility for the murders. The statement said, in part,

"We, the members of the Indigenous Women's Network, address our comments to the world. On February 25, we received word that our sister Ingrid Washinawatok, the Co-Chair of The Indigenous Women's Network and Lahe'ena'e Gay and Terence Freitas, two other members of a humanitarian delegation to the U'wa People of Colombia, were kidnapped. It was during the end of their visit that our sisters and brother were kidnapped by hooded men in civilian clothing from the car they were traveling in. The three were part of a delegation that had been invited by the U'wa People to join in prayer and solidarity. The purpose of the trip was to assist the U'wa People in establishing a cultural education system for their children and support the continuation of their traditional way of life.

"The morning of March 5, the U.S. Embassy contacted the families of Ingrid, Lahe'ena'e and Terence informing them their bodies had been found in Venezuela about 30 yards from the border of Colombia. They had been bound, blindfolded, beaten, tortured, and shot numerous times. It was through Ingrid's credit cards, which were still in her possession, that they were able to trace their identity so rapidly.

"The Indigenous Women's Network, joining with the Menominee Nation, and other Indigenous Nations, is calling for a full prosecution of those responsible, and an investigation into the actions of the U.S. State Department in reference to this incident. We believe that the U.S. State Department destabilized negotiations and ultimately cost our sisters and brother their lives in a possible attempt to gain financial support for U.S. policies in Colombia.

"We attribute this assertion to the fact that exactly during the negotiations for the release of the three humanitarian workers, the U.S. State Department released approximately \$230 million in military support for the alleged Anti-Drug War in Colombia. The Colombian government then attacked and killed over 70 members of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in an orchestrated attack. We believe that these two overt acts may have destabilized any hopes for the release of our sisters and brother.

"The U'wa People live in the Arauca province in Northeastern Colombia. The U.S. multi-national oil corporations, Occidental Petroleum and Shell Oil, had been carrying out oil exploration in the area known as the Samore block, the ancestral homelands of the U'wa People. It is estimated that these oil fields hold less than 1.5 billion barrels of oil, equating to less than a three-month supply for the U.S. The U'wa People had threatened to commit mass suicide if these oil companies were successful in their exploitive endeavors.

"U.S. and Colombian government officials were prompt to lay blame on the left wing guerilla forces of FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia). This situation is not one that blame can be established through words of government officials without conducting an investigation. It is a much more complex crime.

"The reality is that the indigenous community and the U.S. State Department had both been involved in negotiations for the release of these three humanitarian workers. Apesanahkwat, Chairman of the Menominee Nation, was active in attempting to negotiate the release of the hostages as soon as he heard of their capture. 'I sent a direct communique to the leadership of FARC two days after [Ingrid] was captured. The FARC leadership had sent a response by e-mail the morning of the hostages' death,' Apesanahkwat said, 'They sent greetings to us as a relative indigenous group, and said they were optimistic about seeking her release,' he said. Yet, as Apesanahkwat noted, the U.S. government sent money for arms to the Colombian government four or five days after the kidnappings, knowing that those arms might be used against the rebels who may have held the

kidnap victims, and that the kidnap victims might well be executed in retaliation. Seventy FARC rebels were killed in a government-led attack just before the kidnap victims were executed.

"We, the Indigenous Women's Network join with the Menominee Nation is calling for a Congressional inquiry into the State Department actions in Colombia, with regards to this incident. We also request, on behalf of our sister Ingrid, that her death not be used to forward political ends of the U.S. State Department, but that instead, it be recognized as a crime, a continuation of the Indian wars....

"Ingrid and her companions gave the ultimate sacrifice -- their lives - - in the struggle for the attainment of human rights for Indigenous Peoples. State Department support will increase the militarization of a country already fraught with one of the highest rates of violence in the Western Hemisphere, and a state continuing violence against Indigenous peoples. It is against violence, and for the life of the people and the land, that Ingrid, and the others stood.

"Ingrid as well as her companions viewed the situation of the U'wa as a part of the global struggle for Indigenous self determination as well as the preservation of the natural environment. The deaths of our three companeros must be understood as having a direct relationship to the many thousands of deaths of those who seek human justice not only in Colombia but throughout Latin America and other parts of the world.

"We who work for social justice must ensure that further repercussions do not fall on the U'wa community simply because they sought and received international solidarity and support from groups like Project Underground [[www.moles.org/](http://www.moles.org/)], the Indigenous Women's Network and the Pacific Cultural Conservancy International.[2] The Indigenous Women's Network and others will do our utmost to see that justice is done and that we will continue Ingrid's fight in her support of the U'wa Peoples and all those who work for social justice....

"As women, we are the Mothers of our Nations. We share the responsibility of being life-givers, nurturers and sustainers of life-- as Mother Earth is a life giver.

"The Indigenous Women's Network is committed to nurturing our children and planting seeds of truth for generations to come. We do not want to repeat past mistakes. We will continue our work to eliminate the oppression of colonization, and to end the Indian wars...."

--Peter Montague (National Writers Union, UAW Local 1981/AFL-CIO)

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[1] A web site containing information about these murders is being maintained by the Indigenous Environmental Network: [www.alphacdc.com/ien/colombia.html](http://www.alphacdc.com/ien/colombia.html). The Indigenous Women's Network maintains a web site at [www.honorearth.com/iwn/](http://www.honorearth.com/iwn/).

[2] Lahe'ena'e Gay was director of Pacific Cultural Conservancy International (PCCI) in Hawaii; telephone (808) 965-8855.

[3] Andrew Jacobs, "3 Kidnapped Americans Killed; Colombian Rebels Are Suspected," NEW YORK TIMES March 6, 1999, pg. A1. And: Susan Sachs, "3 Victims in Colombia Defended Indigenous People," NEW YORK TIMES March 7, 1999, pg. A18; and Larry Rohter, "Executions of 3 Americans in Colombia May Prolong Civil War," NEW YORK TIMES March 7, 1999, pg. A19.

[4] Associated Press, "Colombia Rebels Admit to Killings," March 10, 1999.

[5] Thomas W. Lippman, "Looking for Oil in New Places, American Firms Go Outside U.S.," WASHINGTON POST December 28, 1991, pg. D1.

[6] Serge F. Kovaleski, "Bombs Close Colombian Oil Pipeline; 32d Attack This Year Laid to Rebel Group," WASHINGTON POST June 24, 1998, pg. A25. And: Serge F. Kovaleski, "Violent Attacks by Guerrillas Undermine Colombia's Oil Boom; Rebels Declare War on Industry, Ambush Troops Protecting Pipeline," WASHINGTON POST July 27, 1997, pg. A23.

Descriptor terms: indigenous people; colombia; violence; oil industry; shell oil; occidental petroleum; latin america; indian wars;