

British Petroleum in Colombia: Colombian Army Attacks Striking BP Workers

By [Claire Hall](#)

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A five month long mobilisation against BP in the Casanare region of Colombia has escalated after the Colombian army entered the BP installations with force this week and confronted workers who have been peacefully occupying BP installations since May 23 to protest BP's failure to conclude negotiations with the workers and community.

At midday on Wednesday a heavily armed commando group of the National Colombian Army leapt over the security fence of the Tauramena Central Processing Facility and subjected the group of workers to physical and verbal aggression. Oscar Garcia, of the National Oil Workers Union said "this war-like handling of a group of workers is an excessive use of force and treats a labour conflict as though it were an issue of public order. This shows how BP is bent on war against workers who are only demanding that their fundamental rights be respected." [i]

The calm response by the striking workers brought the situation temporarily under control but the army remains present and tensions are high. Colombia continues to have the highest level of trade union murders in the world with 17 trade unionists murdered so far this year.

"It is no secret that since BP arrived in the early nineties we have not been able to organize workers until now due to the presence of paramilitary groups operating in the oil fields," said Edgar Mojica from the National Oil Workers Union.

At night workers sleep chained to machinery under temporary shelters as a precaution against any further attempts to violently remove them.

"BP thinks that we will give up, tired and afraid but we will put up with these conditions as this is a struggle for everyone," said Ramiro from the Movement for Dignity of Casanare. "We will only leave here when BP signs an agreement on salary increases, more dignified working conditions, security guarantees for all involved in the mobilisations, and honours the pre-agreements made in the environmental, human rights, social investment and goods and services commissions."

The workers are saddened but not surprised at the measures they are forced to take to try to reach agreements with BP. The mobilisation started in February of this year. Workers were forced to take direct action and block access roads to BP's installations after the oil corporation refused to recognise the workers rights to a union and to a collective bargaining agreement. The blockades were violently attacked by ESMAD, the notorious Colombian riot police, in an operation to end the protest. [ii]

This is not the first time that civil society movements against BP have been met with violence. In 2003, communities protested against BP, demanding action on ecological, social and labour issues. BP refused to negotiate. In the months following community leaders involved in the mobilisation were assassinated (2004 Oswaldo Vargas, 2005 Parmenio Parra).[iii] Furthermore, a preliminary public hearing held in 2007 in the UK on BP's activities in Colombia confirmed that there is sufficient evidence to conclude that BP has a case to answer that it is complicit in the extermination of social organisations in Casanare as part of direct strategy to maximise profits.”[iv]

Despite the history of repression, the response to the ESMAD attack in February was overwhelming. Two thousand people marched in support, fifteen more road blockades spontaneously sprung up, community members and local businesses joined the strike and the Movement for the Dignity of Casanare was born. BP was forced to listen and agreed to participate in the five commissions. Popular assemblies were held to decide on the bargaining demands which were later presented to BP on March 23. However, after two months of dialogue, the labour commission had made no advances and the current strike began.

Casanare is a region characterised by extreme levels of poverty, in spite of the oil that flows out of the region to the United States. This poverty has been worsened by the environmental degradation caused by the oil exploration and extraction, and the subsequent contamination and loss of water sources, according to local farmers whose livelihoods depend on water.

“We have heard about the BP incident in the USA. We send our condolences to the families and fellow workers of those who died due to the failure of BP to take the necessary measures to ensure safe operations and protect the lives of people working for them,” said Garcia of the National Oil Workers Union. “Here in Colombia, BP has also shown their lack of respect for life. They have brought about a war that has left over 9000 people dead.”

He added, “We categorically hold BP to blame for this latest catastrophe in the USA and we demand that BP repairs to the extent possible the damage they have caused. We extend our solidarity to the Northamerican people affected and we ask for your solidarity with the Casanarean people and you are welcome to visit and see how things are here.”

BP continues to provide support to the 16th Brigade, which was created in 1991 in order to provide security to the oilfields in Casanare. They have a long, cruel and documented history of human rights violations, including: extrajudicial executions, disappearances, murders, torture, rape and the forced displacement of campesino communities. However the grave humanitarian crisis in Casanare and its relationship to the oil industry – in particular to BP – is not deterring the Movement for the Dignity of Casanare.

“Despite BP’s misinformation campaign we are determined and united and we will keep resisting with dignity,” said Ramiro. “And if we can unite with people from the USA we will be even stronger and achieve much more.”

Notes:

[i]http://usofrenteobrero.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=840:arremeti-da-del-ejercito-nacional-contra-trabajadores-en-tauramena-

[casanare&catid=35:nacional&Itemid=143](#)

[ii]

<http://www.colombiasolidarity.org.uk/events/26-upcoming-events/493-police-assault-bp-oil-workers-in-colombia>

[iii] <http://espacio.org.uk/bp/CasanareMission2007Report.pdf>

[iv] http://espacio.org.uk/bp/PUBLIC_DECLARATION_Glasgow.pdf

Espacio Bristol-Colombia is an autonomous collective of people working in solidarity with communities and organisations fighting for peace with social justice in Colombia. We are based in and around the city of Bristol (England), with a growing membership from across the country, and are part of the international [Network of Friendship and Solidarity with Colombia](#) (Red de Hermandad).

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