

Chevron's Devastating Pollution of Ecuadorian Amazon: Donziger Slams Criminal Contempt Ruling as 'Message of Intimidation' to Human Rights Lawyers

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Human rights lawyer Steven Donziger said Monday that he is a victim of an "obvious travesty of justice" and vowed to appeal after a judge [found](#) him guilty on six counts of criminal contempt of court.

The ruling by U.S. District Judge Loretta Preska marks the latest development in a case that stems from Donziger's role in securing a historic, multibillion-dollar settlement against Chevron over the oil giant's [devastating pollution](#) of the Ecuadorian Amazon.

Chevron has not paid any of the 2011 settlement, which the corporation claims was improperly obtained.

While the Ecuadorian Supreme Court upheld the original settlement, Chevron has [relentlessly pushed](#) its fraud claims in U.S. court. In 2014, a federal judge with [connections](#) to Chevron ruled—based on testimony from a witness who has since [admitted](#) to lying—that Donziger was guilty of a "pattern of racketeering activity," a charge he has denied.

Donziger was then [ordered](#) to turn over his cell phone and computer to Chevron. When he appealed on the grounds that the devices contained client information, U.S. District Judge Lewis Kaplan hit the attorney with criminal contempt charges that ultimately landed him under house arrest, where he has remained for [more than 700 days](#).

In a [statement](#) (pdf) Monday, Donziger characterized Preska's ruling as "the latest attempt by Chevron and its judicial allies to criminalize me and to send a message of intimidation to legitimate human rights lawyers who successfully challenge the major polluters of the fossil

fuel industry.”

“The decision marks a sad day for the rule of law, for our democracy, and for our planet,” Donziger added. “The United States has now become one of those countries where environmental advocates are attacked, put in jail, or even murdered for doing their jobs successfully.”

Donziger went on to describe Preska’s decision as “the result of a patently unfair trial process that she and Judge Kaplan structured to undermine my defense and to make me appear guilty.”

In 2019, after the Southern District of New York [declined](#) to take up the case against Donziger, Kaplan [appointed](#) a [Chevron-connected](#) private law firm to pursue the prosecution. Kaplan then handpicked Preska—previously a member of the Chevron-funded Federalist Society—to preside over the case.

In his statement Monday, Donziger said Preska “let Chevron’s own lawyers testify” against him “while protecting them from having to disclose how much Chevron paid them.”

“Judge Preska already has detained me in my home for 720 days when the longest sentence ever given for my supposed ‘crime’ is 90 days of home confinement,” Donziger said. “We have a strong appeal and I look forward to the opportunity to brief the appellate court on this obvious travesty of justice. I also repeat my call for Judge Preska to release me immediately so I can return to my human rights work and help those in Ecuador who are suffering and dying because of Chevron’s dumping of billions of gallons of cancer-causing toxic waste into the Amazon.”

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