

Indigenous 'genocide' in battle for oilfields

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IT HAS been called the world's second "oil war" but the only similarity between Iraq and events in the jungles of northern Peru over the past few weeks has been the mismatch of force. On one side have been police armed with automatic weapons, tear gas, helicopter gunships and armoured cars. On the other are several thousand Awajun and Wambis Indians, many of them in war paint and armed with bows and arrows, and spears.

In some of the worst violence in Peru in 20 years, the Indians warned Latin America what could happen if companies are given free access to the Amazonian forests to exploit an estimated 6billion barrels of oil and take as much timber as they like.

After months of peaceful protests, the police were ordered to use force to remove a roadblock near Bagua Grande.

In the fights that followed, nine police officers and at least 50 Indians were killed, with hundreds more wounded or arrested. The indigenous rights group Survival International described it as "Peru's Tiananmen Square".

"For thousands of years, we've run the Amazon forests," said Servando Puerta, one of the protest leaders. "This is genocide. They're killing us for defending our lives, our sovereignty, human dignity."

As riot police broke up more demonstrations in Lima and a curfew was imposed on many Peruvian Amazonian towns, President Alan Garcia backed down in the face of condemnation of the massacre. He suspended - but only for three months - laws that would allow the forest to be exploited.

Peru is just one of many countries in open conflict with its indigenous people over natural resources. Barely reported in the international press, there have been major protests around mines, oil, logging and mineral exploitation in Africa, Latin America, Asia and North America. Hydroelectric dams, biofuel plantations as well as coal, copper, gold and bauxite mines are all at the centre of major land rights disputes.

A massive military force continued last week to raid communities opposed to oil companies' presence on the Niger delta. The delta, which provides 90 per cent of Nigeria's foreign earnings, has always been volatile but guns have flooded in and security has deteriorated.

Nigeria's main militant group said yesterday it had destroyed an oil pipeline belonging to the US company Chevron.

"A major gas pipeline manifold and another major crude oil pipeline belonging to Chevron JV

recently repaired at a sum of over \$US56 million [\$68million] were both blown up," the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta said.

It warned that its fighters were heading to the Chevron tank farm in Escravos and urged staff to flee.

The escalation of violence came in the week that Shell agreed to pay £9.7million (\$19.7million) to ethnic Ogoni families – whose homeland is in the delta – who had led a peaceful uprising against it and other oil companies in the 1990s, and who had taken the company to court in New York accusing it of complicity in writer Ken Saro-Wiwa's execution in 1995.

In West Papua, Indonesian forces protecting some of the world's largest mines have been accused of human rights violations. Hundreds of tribesmen have been killed in the past few years in clashes between the army and people with bows and arrows.

"An aggressive drive is taking place to extract the last remaining resources from indigenous territories," said Victoria Tauli-Corpus, chairwoman of the UN permanent forum on indigenous issues. "There is a crisis of human rights. There are more and more arrests, killings and abuses.

"This is happening in Russia, Canada, the Philippines, Cambodia, Mongolia, Nigeria, the Amazon, all over Latin America, Papua New Guinea and Africa," MsTauli-Corpus said. "It is global. We are seeing a human rights emergency. A battle is taking place for natural resources everywhere. Much of the world's natural capital – oil, gas, timber, minerals – lies on or beneath lands occupied by indigenous people."

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