

Ecuadoreans Go to Canada to Collect Billions from Chevron



Quito, September 13 (RHC)-- Ecuadorean Indigenous groups' years-long court battle to force oil giant Chevron Corp. to pay \$9.5 billion in damages for the environmental disaster known as "Amazon Chernobyl" has begun a new phase, this time in Canada.

Plaintiffs from Ecuador have been attempting for years to collect damages it won in its 2011 lawsuit against Chevron in a court in Ecuador, where the multinational oil giant no longer has assets that can be seized.

In a pretrial hearing in a Toronto court this week, Ecuadorean representatives will make the case that Canadian subsidiaries are liable for the damages, which would allow the lawsuit to proceed. Chevron, formerly Texaco, will argue that its Canadian business operations have no connection with affairs in Ecuador, legal experts say.

"The Indigenous peoples of Ecuador deserve full access to justice and a healthy environment so that we and our Amazonian neighbors can live with dignity," said Humberto Piaguaje, president of the Union of Affected Communities in Ecuador and a leading activist in the fight against Chevron, said in a statement ahead of the hearing.

The plaintiffs' attorney, Alan Lenczner, warned that Chevron has set a precedent of strategically covering

up facts and falsifying documents, warranting scrutiny. He argued that Chevron has requested too much information without adequate authorization while the company, on the other hand, has released heavily redacted documents, failing to disclose pertinent details to the case.

Chevron pushed for the case to be thrown out, arguing that Chevron Canada cannot be held liable for an international ruling against Chevron Corp. in Ecuadorean courts. Plaintiffs believe that Canadian courts in the province of Ontario have jurisdiction to rule on the lawsuit.

The much-awaited hearing comes after a U.S. federal appeals court ruled last month that Ecuadorean plaintiffs cannot seize Chevron's assets in the United States. But that decision did not impact the group's ability to collect damages in other countries where Chevron has significant holdings, including Canada.

"We are urging Canada's courts to move quickly because many people, including children, are sick and dying from the contamination Chevron left behind on our ancestral lands and the company continues to disrespect legal rulings," Carlos Guaman, president of the Amazon Defense Coalition representing some 80 affected communities, said in a statement. "Chevron's strategy for over two decades has been to throw sand into the gears of the judicial process by forum shopping and manipulating evidence, which we are prepared to show Canadian courts."

Ahead of the hearing, 14 Canadian organizations focused on human rights, Indigenous, environmental, and labor issues released an open letter condemning Chevron's bid to evade justice for environmental destruction. The organizations also urged the government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to block Chevron from selling off assets in the country before the trial concludes and called on Canadians to "stay vigilant" in support of affected communities.

While drilling in Ecuador from 1964 to 1992, Chevron, then Texaco, deliberately dumped 16 billion gallons of toxic waste in the oil-rich area of Lago Agrio in Ecuador's Amazon. The company also left behind 1,000 unremediated waste pits that continue to leak sludge into surrounding water sources and soil.

Based on thousands of pages of evidence, Ecuador's Supreme Court ordered Chevron in 2013 to pay US\$9.5 billion in damages and cleanup costs, but the oil giant has refused to comply, dragging out the lengthy court battle.

Known as one of the world's largest environmental disasters, Chevron's oil dumping in Ecuador has impacted as many as 30,000 people, mostly Indigenous residents. Ecuadorean Foreign Minister Guillaume Long argues that the Chevron case is a prime example of how restrictions on national sovereignty through imperialism and corporate domination in a country like Ecuador make communities easy targets of exploitation.

"The Chevron-Texaco abuse is one of the greatest examples in our region of the kind of abuses you can be a victim of, and the kind of predatory behaviour that can suddenly destroy whole communities and indeed the ecosystems of whole regions."

Ecuadorean groups have also sought to enforce the ruling for Chevron to pay \$9.5 billion in damages in Argentina and Brazil, where the company also has significant holdings.

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