

STANDING UP FOR THE ENVIRONMENT IN ECUADOR

THE ASSEMBLY FOR THE DEFENCE OF OUR RIVERS GALA, CHICO, TENGUEL AND RIVER SIETE

HUMAN RIGHTS
DEFENDERS
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FEARS ABOUT THE EFFECTS OF IRREGULAR MINING ACTIVITY ON THE ENVIRONMENT AND ON THE HEALTH OF NEARBY COMMUNITIES HAVE LED TO THE CREATION OF VIBRANT COMMUNITY-BASED GROUPS DETERMINED TO DEFEND THEIR HEALTH AND LIVELIHOODS IN THE FACE OF THREATS AND INTIMIDATION.

Esther Landetta Chica is a leading member of the community-based Assembly for the Defence of Our Rivers Gala, Chico, Tenguel and River Siete (Asamblea Pro-Defensa de Nuestros Ríos Gala, Chico, Tenguel y Río Siete) in the town of Tenguel, Guayas province. This Assembly is part of a regional and national network of organizations which promote the sustainable use of natural resources and oppose irregular mining activities that they believe have a detrimental impact on the environment and their rights.

Esther Landetta is also a member of the Women Defenders of the Pachamama Front (Frente de Mujeres Defensoras de la Pachamama) which aims to provide a space where women can develop tools and skills to participate actively in the National Coordination for the Defence of Life and Sovereignty (Coordinadora nacional por la

Ten years after the adoption of the UN Declaration on **Human Rights Defenders** (Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms), they continue to face restrictions on their work, harassment, intimidation and abuse. Yet despite the risks and challenges, human rights defenders continue to make a real difference to the lives of individuals around the world.

Human rights defenders strive to close the gap between the promise of justice and equality in dignity and rights set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the reality of continuing human rights abuses today. Their work is vital for the realization of human rights for all.

Defensa de la Vida y la Soberanía), an important human rights forum, and other platforms. As women defending the rights of their communities, they point to specific challenges facing women as a result of mining projects.

As leading member of the Assembly for the Defence of Our Rivers Gala, Chico, Tenguel and River Siete, Esther Landetta has publicly denounced the pollution of these rivers, reportedly caused by irregular and unchecked mining activities in the area and the discharge of toxic waste. The Assembly emerged as a response to the growing concern in communities about possible contamination caused by mining operations in Azuay province to the rivers on which they depend. The rivers are the main supply of water for drinking, washing and bathing, and they provide irrigation for agriculture, one of the main sources of income.

Several members of these communities have expressed concern about the effects of the contamination on their communities' health and livelihoods. As one of the Assembly's main spokespersons, Esther Landetta has been at the forefront of efforts to bring this issue to public attention by reaching out to the national and regional media which have begun to document and publicize the problem of river pollution in the Tenguel region.

Esther Landetta has also worked to put pressure on local authorities to investigate the effects of mining activities in the area. As a result of the complaints, an inquiry



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into the contamination of the Gala, Tenguel, Chico and Siete rivers was carried out by an independent research company. The investigation was commissioned by the municipality of Guayaquil, Guayas province, and conducted under the supervision of the Municipal Department of the Environment. The investigation found that the water and soil contained high levels of metal contamination, exceeding the maximum levels permitted under Ecuadorian environmental legislation. The findings were published in April 2008 along with recommendations to the mayor that he authorize the Department of the Environment to continue monitoring contamination levels and that local health authorities commission a medical study to assess the health repercussions on communities of the excessive levels of heavy metals found in the water and soil.

As a result of the findings of the inquiry, a number of mining concessions operating in the area were suspended. However, some mining concessions have apparently reopened.



The Declaration on Human Rights Defenders was adopted by the UN General Assembly on 9 December 1998. The term “human rights defender” is used to describe people who act in many different ways and in different capacities to protect and promote human rights.

Some defenders work against particular abuses, such as torture or forced eviction. Others work for the rights of specific groups or sectors of the population facing discrimination and disadvantage, such as Indigenous People, ethnic or religious minorities, rural women, street children, or lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people.

For all their diversity, human rights defenders whoever they are and whatever they do have several characteristics in common. They all uphold the fundamental principle of universality – that all human beings are equal in dignity and rights, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, or any other status. All are committed to respecting the rights and freedoms of others in their own actions.

Above and cover: Members and supporters of the Women Defenders of the Pachamama Front celebrate World Environment Day, Ecuador, 5 June 2008.

Esther Landetta and the Assembly are also continuing to exert pressure on the authorities of the Municipality of Guayaquil to carry out the medical studies recommended in the April 2008 report, which are believed to be scheduled to take place in the coming months.

THREATS AND INTIMIDATION

Esther Landetta has been targeted for a series of threats and intimidation because of her crucial role in voicing communities’ concerns about possible negative consequences of irregular mining activities in Guayas province.

On 1 April 2008, three men, who claimed they were members of a committee for the improvement of the town of Portobelo, visited Esther Landetta’s house. She was not home at the time, so the men reportedly questioned her nephews. The men asked about Esther Landetta’s whereabouts and asked for her telephone number. Esther Landetta was later able to identify them as police officers from El Oro province. On 8 April, she filed a complaint with the Public Prosecutor’s Office in Guayas province.

The threats against her intensified after the publication of the April 2008 report into river contamination. Throughout May and June, she received anonymous telephone death threats telling her that if she did not stop her complaints, she or another member of her family would be killed. On one occasion, the caller referred menacingly to the fact that she had “a very pretty daughter”.



Article 1, UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders

9 DECEMBER 2008 MARKS THE 10TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE UN DECLARATION ON HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS. IT IS AN OPPORTUNITY TO PUBLICLY ACKNOWLEDGE THE LEGITIMATE WORK OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS AND TAKE ACTION TO SUPPORT AND PROTECT THEM



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On 12 July 2008, a phone caller warned Esther Landetta that hit men had been hired to kill her, possibly that same night. Fearing for her life and for the lives of her children, she went into hiding. Esther Landetta is currently receiving official protection under the National Programme for Victims and Witnesses. According to Esther Landetta, police are providing her

with protection where she is now, but have told her that they cannot guarantee her safety if she visits other places as they will not accompany her.

The Public Prosecutor's Office has opened an investigation into the threats against Esther Landetta. To date it has not progressed. She is still unable to return

home because of fear for her safety and that of her family.

Other members of organizations belonging to the National Coordination for the Defence of Life and Sovereignty have also reported harassment and threats because of their opposition to mining projects.

TAKE ACTION NOW

PLEASE WRITE TO THE ECUADORIAN AUTHORITIES:

- Highlighting the important contribution made by Esther Landetta and the Assembly for the Defence of Our Rivers Gala, Chico, Tenguel and River Siete in defending human rights and opposing irregular and unchecked mining activities that they believe have a detrimental impact on the environment and their rights;
- Calling for an immediate, impartial and thorough investigation into the threats against Esther Landetta, for those responsible to be brought to justice, and for the results of this investigation to be made public;

- Urging the authorities to continue to provide protection measures to Esther Landetta while she is in hiding, and for the protection measures to remain in place when she is able to return to her home and community. All measures must be in strict accordance to her wishes;
- Reminding them of their obligation – set out in the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders – to recognize the legitimacy of the activities of human rights defenders and defenders' right to carry out their activities without obstacles or fear of reprisals.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS TO:

Minister of the Interior
Dr. Fernando Bustamante Ponce
Ministro de Gobierno
Benalcázar No. 4-24 y Espejo
Quito, Ecuador
Fax: +593 2 295 5497
Salutation: Señor Ministro/Dear Minister

Minister of Justice and Human Rights
Dr. Gustavo Jalkh
Av. Amazonas y Atahualpa
Quito-Pichincha
Fax: +593 (02) 2464 914
Salutation: Señor Ministro/Dear Minister

Attorney General
Dr. Washinton Pesántez Muñoz
Ministro Fiscal General del Estado
Av. Eloy Alfaro No. 32-250 y
Av. República
Quito, Ecuador
Fax: +593 (02) 255 8561
Salutation: Señor Ministro Fiscal/Dear Attorney General

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Amnesty International is a global movement of 2.2 million people in more than 150 countries and territories who campaign to end grave abuses of human rights.

Our vision is for every person to enjoy all the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights standards.

We are independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion – funded mainly by our membership and public donations.

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