

Indian tribe clashes with illegal loggers

One logger was killed and another wounded in an encounter with members of an indigenous tribe that lives deep within an Amazon rain forest reserve.

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COCA, Ecuador - Illegal loggers have once again clashed with members of an indigenous tribe in Ecuador's Amazon River basin, leaving one man dead and another wounded.

The two loggers were working along the Cononaco Chico River within the Yasuní Biosphere Reserve, a UNESCO-designated protected wilderness, when they were attacked by Taromenani indians wielding 12-foot wooden spears, the survivor has said.

ISOLATED TRIBE

The Taromenani are one of the world's last tribes living with few contacts with the outside world. Estimated at less than 150 people, the Taromenani reside in a swath of dense jungle inside the reserve known as the Untouchable Zone.

Andrés Moreira said he and fellow logger William Angulo were logging valuable hardwoods in the area on April 12 when dozens of Taromenani men and women appeared, according to Moreira,

"I heard a strange sound in the jungle, and I looked over and my companion was being speared," said Moreira, who is slowly recovering from his injuries at a hospital in Quito, the country's capital. "I ran and I was speared in the back, but I kept running to escape."

The spear damaged Moreira's spinal cord, leaving him partially paralyzed. Angulo died during surgery after being flown to Quito with multiple spears still lodged in his body.

The incident, which received little media attention outside Ecuador, was at least the second of its kind in the past year. In August, another logger was attacked in the same region by Taromenani. A video taken by a member of the group that recovered his body shows 33 spears stuck in the corpse.

STILL A MYSTERY

So effective have the Taronenani been in evading the outside world that they remain a mystery to anthropologists, researchers and local tribes alike. But there is no question that the Taronenani's future is in peril as loggers push deeper and deeper into the jungle in search of cedar, mahogany and other valuable timber.

Ecuadorian indigenous leader Moi Enomenga has sent a report to the U.N.'s Permanent Forum on Indigenous Affairs arguing that only improved military controls will keep illegal loggers from penetrating the UNESCO reserve, which is said to have the highest biodiversity of any forest on earth.

But Ecuadorian military officers say keeping loggers out of vast tracts of jungle is a difficult job.

'UNTOUCHABLE ZONE'

"Right now we're trying to define where the limits of the Untouchable Zone should be," said Army Lt. Col. William Viteri, whose unit operates in the region.

"Once we have the limits, then the armed forces can work with the other organizations in the area to enforce them."

Many area residents believe, however, that soldiers on the ground are actually cooperating with loggers in exchange for a cut of the profits.

"I've seen military watching over loggers loading wood onto trucks," said biologist David Gilbert, a Fulbright Scholar living in the region.