

Ecuador's indigenous Shuar resist extinction as push for minerals grows

The Grayzone's Oscar Leon interviews Tsunki Chup, a leader of Ecuador's Shuar people, who are currently being forced into extinction. This is the latest in a years-long series of reports by Leon on the Shuar's fight for survival in the face of over-extraction and political corruption. For years, the Shuar have been fighting their removal from one of the last biodiverse endemic areas on Earth. Now, they face unprecedented pressure under the government of US puppet President Daniel Noboa, who has opened up his country's lands to satisfy the relentless US drive for copper and rare earth minerals. ||| The Grayzone ||| Find more reporting at <https://thegrayzone.com> Support our original journalism at Patreon: <https://patreon.com/grayzone> Facebook: <https://facebook.com/thegrayzone> Twitter: <https://twitter.com/thegrayzonenews> Instagram: <https://instagram.com/thegrayzonenews> Minds: <https://minds.com/thegrayzone> Mastodon: <https://mastodon.social/@thegrayzone> #TheGrayzone

#Max

An entire Indigenous culture, the Shuar, is being forced into extinction. Modern industrial needs, coupled with political corruption, are creating the conditions for a massive territorial ravaging of one of the last biodiverse, endemic areas on planet Earth. The Shuar people, who until recently lived in paradise according to their customs and in balance with nature—a nature that will be immediately wiped out and exploited once roads are opened to the public—are being displaced. We spoke to Zunki Chup, a young leader from the town of Mekans in the Zamora Chinchipe province, southeast Ecuador.

#Guest 1

We are in the Cordillera del Cóndor, a megadiverse region. It's impossible to list all the animals here—there are just too many.

#Guest 1

The Amazon is home to an extraordinary range of flora and fauna found nowhere else on Earth. We estimate there are around 2,000 species of birds and animals in this area, though the exact number remains unknown. For that reason, we work with a team of paraecologists and ecology students who conduct scientific research to identify the species that inhabit this part of the Amazon.

#Guest 1

paraecologists who are conducting scientific research, along with paraecology students, to identify and understand this whole process.

#Guest 1

The Cordillera del Cóndor, including the Mekans territory, is home to numerous mammal species and is often described as one of the lungs of the world.

#Max

This situation, disguised as progress, could soon turn into a forced displacement of the entire Shuar people. And it's one of the immediate effects of Donald Trump's violent, corporate-driven political model, which has empowered local rulers who mirror his self-serving, pro-corporate brand of power. One such leader is Daniel Noboa, president of Ecuador. While Noboa has declared a war on criminal gangs, he has simultaneously unleashed a full-scale, asymmetrical campaign against political opponents and critics. His war chest includes near-total control over the legislative, electoral, and judicial systems, the military and police, and, critically, the media industry, which—with a few honorable exceptions—has been either bought off or terrorized into compliance. Do you think you can resist another two or three years of Daniel Noboa—a government that has been very militaristic and staunchly allied with the mining companies?

#Guest 1

Our commitment is to resist because this is our territory. We are not on borrowed land, nor is it land we have bought. We are native to this place. We are the seed of the Amazon, of the forest itself. Whether the government supports us or not, we will always remain present and active in our territory. That has always been our objective and our plan. We do not need any government to defend us or to oppose exploitation on our behalf.

#Guest 1

Because governments consistently think in terms of using force to evict us. That is not right. It's a violation of human rights. Authorities must recognize their responsibility to protect Indigenous peoples and nationalities.

#Guest 1

Yet, when vested interests are involved, those responsibilities are easily overridden. We cannot trust transnational corporations either. What we need to be sure of—and what we are sure of—is that we will exist until the very end.

#Max

On February 26, 2026, Daniel Noboa's regime approved a new mining law that lowers environmental safeguards and opens the door to all kinds of investments with uncertain returns for the state, effectively giving mining companies a green light to fully exploit the country. Less than twenty years ago, in 2008, Ecuador had written what was widely considered the greenest constitution on Earth, granting rights to nature—a process that was sabotaged from the beginning and has now completed a 180-degree turnaround under Daniel Noboa, himself an owner of mining interests. This could be the dagger for local farming and Indigenous communities, as well as for the local tourism industry, which depends on pristine forests and rich biodiversity.

The Ecuadorian public has voted in multiple referendums affirming its strong support for the rights of nature. Yet this continues to be ignored by the Ecuadorian government. We spoke with Ángel Antip, a former president of the Shuar nationality. People in the United States, Canada, and other similar countries probably won't fully understand what you're talking about, because the law there is more or less predictable and relatively safe—you can follow it and have a sense of where you stand. But in Ecuador, things aren't like that. The law is relative, it depends, and it's pretty corrupt. So, what has your experience been dealing with the Ecuadorian government, specifically with the law?

#Guest 2

Good afternoon, Oscar. About your question—the truth is, the state is never on our side.

#Guest 1

Good afternoon, Oscar. In response to your question, the truth is that the state is never on our side. The state consistently supports the mining companies because they're the ones that negotiated and received all the mining concessions. As a result, state authorities are never going to favor us. Judges and prosecutors always rule against us, saying we're the ones resisting, that we're obstructing national development.

#Guest 1

And for that reason, they refuse to side with us. However, there are other intermediate authorities—I won't name them—such as political lieutenants, local political bosses, or even the governor, who sometimes intervene to ease the situation so that events don't unfold exactly as the central government intends. That's how we've managed to maintain our position, Oscar.

#Max

We've reported here at The Grayzone—extensively—on indigenous, peasant, and farmers' revolts against the Ecuadorian government. In fact, some of those uprisings have been successful and have

managed to hold back certain aspects of neoliberalization. But that's changed lately. The Ecuadorian government has taken a more aggressive, militarized stance, defending corporate and international interests, and it's become harder for you to resist the power of those corporations.

#Guest 2

Well, according to Ecuadorian law, we've only considered that we coexist within Ecuador.

#Guest 1

Well, according to Ecuadorian law, we're only considered to exist within Ecuador. That is, we don't have primary legal recognition.

#Guest 1

We believe we were human settlements long before the Ecuadorian Constitution, here in Ecuador. Yet within the legal framework, our existence isn't acknowledged.

#Guest 1

Many times, even though there are international norms regarding indigenous peoples that should guarantee our existence, our rights are still violated. For that reason, we don't have much faith in the government.

#Max

Indigenous communities are often the first targets of the global process of exploitation now underway. They serve as a canary in the coal mine as they fight to defend their territories and forests. The stakes are existential. If these communities fall, their lands fall with them. The consequences extend far beyond the disappearance of millennia-old cultures and the forced migration of their peoples. Entire native forests—home to a unique biodiversity of flora and fauna—are polluted, fragmented, and ultimately hunted into extinction once mining operations begin opening access roads for loggers and poachers.

#Max

One of the most conflicted regions is Ecuador's Morona-Santiago, near the border with Peru, where the Shuar-Arutam people are being pushed to the brink by relentless mining interests. Two years ago, The Grayzone traveled to the area to meet with indigenous communities resisting a global surge in demand for copper, driven in part by the expansion of electric vehicles and new technologies that rely on minerals lying beneath their ancestral territories. There, we learned that one of the mining industry's primary strategies is to divide and conquer—and it has proven highly

effective. A Shuar community that once stood united in defense of its way of life has gradually fractured as more leaders abandon their struggle and join mining payrolls. What remains are a handful of small villages continuing to resist the destruction of one of the planet's last and most biologically diverse endemic rainforests.

#Guest 1

We have been fighting for more than two decades to defend our territory against mining concessions in the Cordillera del Condor. Successive governments have granted these concessions without prior, free, and informed consultation with Indigenous peoples and nationalities. Instead of resolving the conflict, many of our members and leaders have been arrested, while the government continues expanding concessions. Six months into my term, I am confronting this reality.

#Guest 1

to resolve them. But every time, the governments in power keep expanding the concessions. So, at the moment,

#Guest 1

We are raising our voices to denounce this. Recently, the president of the Pueblos Arutam signed agreements with the Lowell Company, handing over mineral rights without authorization from the grassroots. Because he signed this agreement unilaterally within the governing council, we no longer have sufficient guarantees to defend our territory. From the communities, we are speaking out so the world will hear us. Our concern is clear: the community president is no longer committed to defending our land. Yesterday, community president Marcelo Uncuch met with 322 representatives from two communities and entered talks with the mining company. They are making unilateral decisions that affect our control of the route in Maycance, which we maintain to prevent Lowell shipments from passing. They have also threatened to use force, request police intervention, or pursue legal action against those leading the resistance, including the community guard.

#Guest 1

Because of this vulnerability, we have made this document public so the government and the world will listen—and so Lowell's subsidiaries in Canada understand that we, as peoples and nationalities, exist here. We are not fauna, even though Ecuadorian governments have treated us that way.

#Guest 1

In Ecuador, constitutional provisions enacted in 2008 require that Indigenous communities be consulted in advance and give their consent before any mining projects can proceed.

#Max

These mining settlements are located within a broader territory that belonged to the Shuar people. Initially, concessions were granted by small local villages that were bought off without respecting the legal safeguards that apply to the nationality as a whole. More recently, that dynamic shifted as newly elected Shuar nationality leaders entered into agreements with mining companies, leaving villages such as Maikans increasingly isolated. As a result, mining companies are now seeking access to their operations through a road that crosses Maikans—access the local community has chosen to block.

The conflict arises from this Shuar village's attempt to assert control over its own territory, as guaranteed by law, even as it stands in opposition to decisions made by its own nationality leadership and against mining interests determined to override that authority. I understand that part of the problem is that this is not just a fight for survival—it's an economic fight as well. Because the towns that sold out to the mining company get tens of thousands of dollars per month, while you don't get any money and you get all the problems and the burden of dealing with the state. So, what about that aspect?

#Guest 1

Well, the fight here is to preserve our territory.

#Guest 1

Well, the fight here is to preserve our territory, because we still have so much to do with it.

#Guest 1

Intact forest, with unexplored and unexploited resources.

#Guest 1

So, some misguided and confused people, used to taking the easy way out, have taken the easy money and now want to exploit the resources underground.

#Guest 1

We, on the other hand, are doing scientific research to show the world everything that exists here—this biodiversity.

#Max

A few years ago, I went to Ecuador to film a documentary about this and visited your community and others. In one of the communities I visited, the mining company had total control of the area. They supposedly owned and ruled over it—with the will of the judicial system, the police, and the local press behind them. And not only that, they also had road checkpoints where their guards would ask where you were going, when, why, and with whom. So that's a lot. Is that the level of control they have over your territory, or do you still have some control over your own land?

#Guest 1

The influence of mining keeps advancing more and more.

#Guest 1

The mining company's influence is steadily expanding across the municipalities. All levels of local government now support the company. The cantonal government has already signed an agreement, and the parish government also receives benefits. Surrounding communities near the operations keep getting bribed. As a result, people are becoming more complacent and blind to what's happening. This is exactly what the company and the state want.

#Guest 1

Communities are becoming increasingly divided, and that's why we continue to fight to achieve our objectives. We have to raise awareness among young people, keep broadening this discussion, and continue building international connections with partners who support the defense of our territory and the protection of biodiversity.

#Max

We reached out to the mining company that operates in the area, but they politely declined to comment. We also contacted representatives from Warints, the pro-mining Shuar village that started this entire chapter of the Shuar struggle by allowing the mining company to operate in their territory, despite the wishes of most Shuar communities and the Shuar Federation—an organization now controlled by the pro-mining side. After setting a date to talk with us, they got cold feet and eventually canceled our meeting. Have you received any kind of help or assistance from international organizations?

#Guest 1

Well, at the moment, as a community, we don't receive any financial support for these struggles. We don't yet have connections or alliances with different organizations, but we're just getting started. We've recently adopted some small, minimal support programs.

#Max

I heard that a United Nations representative was planning to travel to Ecuador to talk with you because of the dire situation you're in right now.

#Guest 1

Hmm, I don't know. I'm not familiar with any of that yet.

#Max

See, as they come closer, they start lying down there. See, he's laying down his bow and arrow. Recently, a video went viral in which naturalist Paul Rosolie, speaking with Lex Fridman, shared his experience getting near an uncontacted tribe in the Amazon region of northern Peru, near Shuar territory. This is truly incredible, man—adding a new layer to the conflict that arises when an untouched area of the rainforest is disturbed. The idea that the jungle and the life within it will be slowly killed is not far-fetched. If deadly chemicals are poured into the rivers, everything will soon be affected and die. We already have examples from other parts of northeastern Ecuador where mining and oil operations have taken place and cancer rates have spiked.

There are many cases, including the famous Chevron case, which the oil giant initially lost—until a New York court, led by federal judge Louis Kaplan of the Southern District of New York, turned it around. Let's also remember that mining is usually carried out in very remote areas, where chemicals and debris are supposedly contained. In this case, though, they would affect a vast network of biodiversity that includes large ancestral communities like the Shuar, as well as uncontacted tribes like the one seen in the video. This adds another layer of complexity, since uncontacted tribes, as well as contacted ones like the Shuar, are territorial by nature and depend on their land being in balance so they can rely on game and plants for survival.

At the same time, by maintaining that territorial balance, they also play a crucial role in conserving the last remaining patches of rainforest on our planet. With this in mind, we can understand why, for the Shuar, the prospect of contaminated jungles and rivers represents an existential threat. The communities that acquiesce to mining operations are, perhaps willingly or unwillingly, relinquishing their heritage and embracing the Western way of life. And in a sense, they have that right. The problem is that their territory lies in the middle of the broader Shuar territory—and that might not be a coincidence. As we mentioned earlier, divide and conquer is in full effect, and it works. How does it feel to live in one of the most persecuted and endangered communities in the world, having to fight for their own territory?

#Guest 1

Well, regarding your question, I believe that Indigenous peoples do not live, as the representative said, on territory granted to us by the state, but rather on territory inherited from our ancestors. Therefore, we believe we are not outsiders—people who have come from elsewhere.

#Guest 1

Whatever happens, with or without state support, we will continue to exist through resistance. Why? Because we live legally and legitimately on our territory.

#Guest 1

For that reason, we believe we can preserve our way of life by adhering to the constitutional norms that guarantee our rights within the state, as well as the international instruments and norms that protect Indigenous peoples. That is how we maintain our existence.

#Max

The Shuar are a millenary community. They're the descendants of people who lived there before the Spaniards, before Ecuador even existed on the map. So to think that someone wants to go there, blow up the mountain, and create pools of poison that will eventually spill into the jungle and the rivers... you know, it takes a very psychopathic mind. It's pretty obvious what's going to happen. So, in my opinion, that seems genocidal—or like a death sentence for the area, the jungle, and your people, doesn't it?

#Guest 2

Correct. Finally, I'd like to leave you with this message: we call on the public and the international community to raise environmental awareness.

#Guest 1

Defending nature is paramount because the destruction caused by developed countries is directly contributing to global warming. I believe humanity is losing its awareness, and it's brutal to destroy the ecology and biodiversity that exist here in the Cordillera del Condor.

#Guest 2

According to available data, there are endemic species in the Cordillera del Condor that have yet to be discovered.

#Guest 1

For that reason, scientific studies must be carried out to identify them and understand the true importance of these species, both flora and fauna.

#Max

One of the conflicts—another conflict brewing—is that some of the youth are veering away from your culture, from your millenary way of life. And on top of that, you have this attack by the multinational, trillion-dollar companies and the Ecuadorian state that work for those companies. And on top of that, you have the internal division that has been sown and promoted by those very same mining companies and the Ecuadorian state. So, in the face of all this, how is the spirit of the Shuar youth holding up?

#Guest 1

So, what I was saying is that the young people today—the young Shuar—have become confused because of what's being taught in the education system.

#Guest 1

Today, Shuar youth are increasingly confused by the education system. When they enter school or attend university, they aren't taught cultural or human values. Instead, the emphasis is on how to achieve so-called development. As a result, many values are being lost. That's why we're doing everything possible to reaffirm our way of life and our customs with young people. For twelve years, we've worked with alternative education outside the Ecuadorian system.

#Guest 1

to value our ways of life, our customs with our young people. And before,

#Guest 1

But these companies blocked those efforts, and many parents went back to the official system because their children couldn't get certificates or degrees. Faced with that pressure, they had to give in. Even so, we keep doing everything we can to instill these values. That's why we created the community tithe here—it's essential to make sure our traditions aren't forgotten. As the representative of MECANS, I'm promoting all these key initiatives so we can preserve and value our way of life as a living culture.

#Max

As we closed this report, U.S. troops entered Ecuador, and the U.S. Southern Command announced the start of military operations aimed at fighting criminal gangs, illegal fishing, and illegal mining. But

this is not a response to an emergency—it's the implementation of a plan years in the making, one we've reported on extensively at The Grayzone. American troops entered Ecuador despite the fact that President Novoa had already lost a referendum in which the Ecuadorian public rejected the presence of foreign troops. Yet when the time came, they entered anyway. Their arrival was facilitated by a legal framework quietly built over the past several years. In 2022, President Guillermo Lasso and Joe Biden signed an agreement, years in the making, laying the groundwork for a broad security partnership and expanded military cooperation.

At the center of this process is President Daniel Novoa, who, after a series of political and economic missteps, is facing record-low approval ratings. Were it not for his government's control over key state institutions, including the electoral authority, his chances of re-election would be slim at best. He is already facing calls for his removal from office. In this context, the arrival of U.S. troops appears to be a strategic move to shore up Novoa, who was born in Miami, and to stabilize his government. The language behind this policy can be found in the U.S. National Defense Authorization Act for fiscal year 2023, which calls for the neutralization not only of criminal and narco-trafficking groups, but also of illegal miners and fishers—precisely the targets cited as troops enter the country.

They do so protected by full immunity from Ecuadorian law under the 2022 agreements. But the framework also refers to confronting internal threats, widely believed to include the Correista political movement, which is already facing intense political and judicial persecution. It also points to tensions with countries such as China, Russia, and Cuba, which had maintained strong relations with Ecuador during the decade-long government of Rafael Correa. And finally, it raises a question that hangs over the conflicts described in this report: will U.S. troops assist in repressing the growing Indigenous and anti-mining resistance to the wave of new projects promoted by Novoa's government? Are they there to make sure he can implement them? And will U.S. troops help Novoa deal with his anti-mining problem? We'll be watching.