‘We saw it coming’: The Indigenous leader fighting climate change

“People from the outside [of Waorani territory] see empty land but to us [Waorani people] the jungle is our pharmacy, our grocery shop, our home supplies shop. People just see gold and wood when they see our land, but this is our home, our diversity. We do not want to destroy our life,” says Nemonte Nenquimo over a Zoom call from her office in the Ecuadorian city of Puyo.

The 36-year-old Waorani leader and land defender is referring to the 802,220 hectares (about 2 million acres) of Waorani territory in the Amazon Pastaza province, of which Puyo is the capital, in Ecuador.

One of the most biodiverse rainforests on earth, it is home to 600 types of birds, 200 different mammal species, 300 types of fish and thousands of plants with medicinal properties, according to Amazon Frontlines, an NGO that works alongside Indigenous communities in the Amazon.

Nemonte calls it Omere, meaning both “jungle” and “our house” in her native Wao language. About 2,000 people in 54 communities make up the Waorani nation.

Nemonte’s eyes light up as she describes her community Nemonpare, at the heart of the territory.

Located in the basin of the Curaray River and surrounded by tapirs, jaguars, streams and sacred waterfalls, she describes the sounds of parrots and leaves creaking under feet as people go about their day harvesting cassava or fishing by the river. About 40 people, including her family, live there.

“When you are in the rainforest, you feel free, at peace in harmony. You bathe in the river or walk in the jungle…it soothes your soul,” she says.

Yet the pristine rivers and animals in the forest are facing extinction as a result of oil drilling, road construction and other operations nearby.

The Waorani people first faced colonisation in 1958 when Christian missionaries moved in, followed by settlers, loggers and Ecuadorian authorities looking for oil. Despite the Waorani’s fight to stop them, road construction for oil extraction began in the 1960s and has had a deep impact on their way of living.

The Ecuador government has also divided the land into blocks to be auctioned to oil companies – covering four provinces and millions of hectares of land, threatening most of the Ecuadorian Amazon. Six of these blocks cover Waorani territory, including Nemonpare.

Many Waorani reject this contact and move deeper into the forest.

For the Waorani, the changes in climate and the impact on the rainforest are not new; they have seen it firsthand for decades.

“People talk and talk about climate change just now, but we saw it coming for years before it was talked about,” explains Nemonte, as she describes the floods and river fluctuations she has witnessed in the last few years – the sort that have never been seen before.

“My dad used to have his small plot with different produce, cassava and plantain. My dad and my mom both had small pieces of land as they had all their life. Their chacras (land to plant food) on the riverbanks were destroyed by the river flooding. This did not happen before; the river is unpredictable now.”

Nemonte’s appreciation and love of her land and her Waorani heritage drove her to lead a legal battle against oil drilling in their territory. In 2019, they won a lawsuit that suspended the auctioning of 180,000 hectares (445,000 acres) of their land for oil drilling, setting an important legal precedent for Indigenous communities fighting extraction operations in the Amazon.

While Nemonte’s leadership has been recognised internationally – Time Magazine named her one of 2020’s most influential people in the world and she won the Goldman Environmental Prize that same year – she is not fazed.

When speaking about her work, her conversation always goes back to her compass: the elderly women in her community, or

as she calls them, Abuelas. It is their wisdom and advice, she says, that have shown her the way forward and given her the strength to keep working for a clean future in the Amazon.

‘They show me the way’

During her high school years, Nemonte left her community for her studies – first to Puyo, and then to Quito, the country’s capital. She excelled at school, translating Spanish texts into her native Wao language and participating in after-school activities.

Far from home, it took approximately 13 hours by bus and boat from Quito to visit family. But that was far from the only factor distancing Nemonte from her community.

Sponsored by missionaries for her schooling and influenced by their teachings in the Amazon, she began spreading a Christian gospel back home.

It was a message that often did not resonate with people in her community who were surrounded by nature and deeply connected to the spiritual importance of it. “I was telling my community what was right and wrong. I was adapting to another culture, without respecting my own,” Nemonte recalls.

During one of her visits to her territory, an Abuela who was on her deathbed asked to have a word with her.

“She took my hand and said she wanted to give me her blessing and said ‘You are a young woman who has learned so many things about the world and that it is so important to defend whatever you do … but what you are doing is not right, you have taken the wrong path. Come back to your land, with the spiritual side of this land, with your ancestral knowledge of your elders. Of course, respect other cultures, but remember your own.’”

Confused, Nemonte was unable to sleep that night. She began to question her life and what had led her away from her community.

“I had been curious to see another way of living but life in Quito was hard, disconnected from my family. My dad was sad I left, life was so different,” she recalls.

“I had no way to feel the freedom I felt in the jungle back in the city. I missed harvesting my own food and walking under tall trees. Living with a bunch of people in a dorm in a cold house instead of the jungle where you are free … that did not sit well with me.”

A few months later she finished her studies, packed up and went home.

Back in Nemonpare, she spent more time with her community and cherished Waorani life: meditating in the morning, setting up the bonfire for gatherings, preparing meals with her family, and sharing stories and songs.

She also began participating more actively in assemblies and decision-making processes, where representatives of families from across the territory gather to discuss issues and come up with joint solutions. As a Spanish speaker, she could liaise with local authorities, organisations in the area, and other Indigenous nations.

For Nemonte, the role of the Abuelas was pivotal. “Women are the peacemakers. Men would go and hunt, but the decisions were always made by women, this is historical in my community.”

As the years passed, Nemonte’s interest in taking care of their land grew. “The forest has kept us alive for years, centuries. We must respect nature because it’s the root tancing Nemonte from her community.

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ily into the jungle. Youth near roads and oil exploitation sites lose that way of life. That is one of the biggest threats we face to our culture, our people.”

In 2014, Nemonte and other Indigenous leaders founded the Ceibo Alliance, a coalition of Waorani, Siona Secoya and Cofan nations in the Ecuadorian rainforest working towards clean water and alternatives for income that move away from natural resource exploitation.

Nemonte cannot imagine her work without the continuous guidance from the elder Waorani women, the Abuelas. “That way of leading, by treasuring every aspect of life and transmitting that has had a deep impact on me as a young woman, mother. Leading is a way of growing because I am never alone.”

Sharing knowledge

Due to give birth to her second child in the coming weeks, Nemonte relies on the ancestral knowledge of rainforest herbs and medicine from her elders. She recalls a time when her six-year-old daughter had a fever and she had not known about a remedy in a tree outside her house.

“Nemo, when your child has a fever, you have to bathe her with this plant,” said an Abuela.

“She said that as I was looking for a pharmacy nearby,” laughs Nemonte.

It is knowledge like this – shared through chants sung throughout the day and at assemblies and gatherings – that Nemonte never stops learning from. From cooking to bathing, the Abuelas have guided her as a leader and as a mother.

“That’s why I was so afraid when the coronavirus hit our community,” says Nemonte. “What would happen to them and their knowledge?”

In May 2020, when Ecuador’s health services were overwhelmed by the pandemic, she liaised with a university and Amazon Frontlines to bring PCR tests into Wao territory – and took legal action against the Ecuadorian state, claiming the government ignored pleas from the Waorani community for COVID testing and monitoring, and ceasing activity from oil companies operating nearby who could bring the virus into the area.

She and other plaintiffs won the case in a provincial court in June 2020, and several government ministries were ordered to take precautionary measures and better coordinate a response with Waorani leaders, as well as provide evidence of how they are monitoring oil operations in the Amazon.

“I was afraid – they are the people guiding us, they have centuries worth of knowledge and I was so afraid this virus might be deadly to them and we would lose all that we had to learn from them,” says Nemonte. **Aljazeera**

The Istanbul Canal is simply another Erdogan populist scam

Populism is driving Turkish politics. Aiming to reduce the sliding economy and the seasonal devaluation of the local currency, Turkey’s President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is grabbing at straws to prop up his crumbling political dominance.

He has launched a $15 billion megaproject to construct a new waterway that connects the Black Sea to the Aegean and Mediterranean Sea.

The Istanbul Canal is an endeavor he himself once described as “crazy.”

Erdogan wants the support of local hard-liner nationalists to boost what’s left of his political appeal.

These nationalists, and particularly members and supporters of the ruling AK Party view the Istanbul Canal as a symbol of national pride and sovereignty. It backs up the Montreux Convention agreement of 1936 concerning the Dardanelles strait.

Broadly the convention permitted free passage of commercial ships through the canal and imposed restrictions on military vessels.

Turkey’s aim at the time was to remain unbiased in any international confrontation similar to what happened in World War I. Erdogan wants to reciprocate the effects of Montreux by launching this project.

It’s a perfect project for Erdogan to exploit to see support transpose in casts for him at the ballot box.

Turkish President and leader of Justice and Development (AK) ruling Party Recep Tayyip Erdogan speaks during a party group meeting at the Grand National Assembly of Turkey (GNAT), in Ankara on June 9, 2021. (Stock image)

The government claims the canal is being pursued from economic and security considerations and has claimed congestion caused by mega tankers crossing the Bosporus endangers the surrounding environment. It has cited a 1979 accident that led to enormous amounts of oil leaking from a ship.

No, the populist political agenda cannot be overlooked.

Istanbul’s mayor Ekrem Imamoglu confirmed this when he expressed a staunch opposing stance to the project saying that he believes it threatens the city.

Ten retired naval generals that voiced their objections were put under house arrest.

Erdogan believes executing this project will make him a national hero who has made a five centuries long dream come true.

Since the days of Suleiman the Magnificent in the 16th Century, the idea of building a grand artificial sea-level waterway connecting the Black Sea to the Sea of Marmara has been an ambition unrealized.

Suleiman came close when architects almost completed plans, while some preparations started. The project collapsed with military conflicts rife in the region.

Over the ensuing centuries the concept has resurfaced, and continues to.

In 2011, the project was reintroduced again by then Prime Minister Erdogan. The proposal sparked controversy in the country.

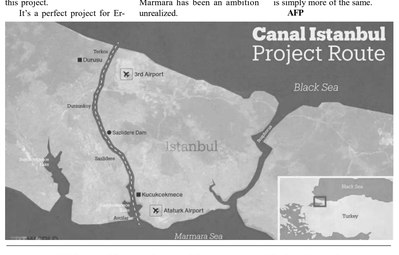
“Either Istanbul or Canal” was one of the famous slogans recurrently raised by protestors against the project in the city over several periods of time.

Today, Erdogan appears firm in his stance that implementing the project is essential, and announced this during a ceremony for its launch.

“Today, we are opening a new page in the history of Turkey’s development. Whether you like or not, we are starting it, we will build it, and we will deliver it to our nation.”

Neo-Ottomanism has engrossed Erdogan throughout his governing tenure. From building grand luxurious mansions to pursuing expansionist foreign policies it’s clear that Erdogan’s political defense mechanism is to go big in the ‘making the empire strong again’ rhetoric. The Istanbul Canal is simply more of the same.

AFP



The Booksellers of Kabul

From P3

country. The crime rate has risen. “The thieves are everywhere, and they’ll kill a person for a mobile phone and some money,” says Shams.

Like millions of Afghans, Shams faces an uncertain future. Some of his family and friends have already left the country. “I would leave myself if I had the means and opportunity,” he says. But there are other factors that make this option undesirable. Not far from his shop is the hotel used by the International Organization for Migration to house Afghan refugees who have been deported from Europe. “I remember how a young man killed himself in his room after he was forced to return,” Shams recalls. “Only after we saw his body did we learn what was going on in the hotel.”

Over a year ago, on Feb. 29, 2020, the Afghan Taliban signed a withdrawal agreement with the Trump administration in Doha, Qatar. The deal included a prisoner exchange between the Taliban and President Ashraf Ghani’s government, to be completed by March 10. Kabul refused on the basis that it was not a party to the agreement; the Taliban in turn ramped up their violence. The insurgents are no longer at war with the U.S.; they are mainly targeting fellow Afghans, many of whom join the security forces to escape poverty. Their prospects look bleak since the Taliban have warned that those who “helped the invaders” will be shown no mercy.

Meanwhile, the Afghan National Army and pro-government militias have intensified their operations and, like the Taliban, have shown little regard for civilian life. Last March, militiamen linked to the notorious CIA-backed Khost Protection Force killed at least 20 civilians, including infants, in southeastern Khost province. A few days later, in eastern Nangarhar, the 02 Unit, another militia under Langley’s control, massacred civilians in a raid. During 2020, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan documented 8,820 civilian casualties (3,035 killed and 5,785 injured), a decrease in the number of civilian casualties by 15% compared to 2019. But a sense of foreboding prevails about what lies ahead once the Taliban and the Afghan National Army join mortal combat without foreign forces as a buffer. When President Joe Biden took over the White House in January, many observers hoped that he would take a different approach to America’s longest war than his predecessor and extend the U.S. presence in the country. Their hopes were frustrated. The Biden administration has announced the withdrawal of all US troops but 650 by Sept. 11, 2021. “We are doomed with them, but we are also doomed without them. That’s the mess we are in,” Shams says. Sherazuddin, however, has a different view. “They should leave our country alone. This is a Muslim land, and it will never accept foreign occupiers,” he says.

For months, Afghan negotiators from both sides have been stuck in peace talks. Yet often, it appears to the public that elitist politicians, warlords and their offspring, and now privileged Taliban leaders in Qatar are engaged in an elaborate pantomime.

“I don’t really believe in these talks. At the end, foreign powers will dictate what’s good and what’s bad for us,” Sherazuddin says with a sense of fatalism. The man who once participated in a jihad against the Soviets is also leery of the Taliban. “Afghans are dying every day. It’s truly difficult for me to say something about their jihad. I think we truly need peace now,” he says.

Shams, on the other hand, thinks that Afghans forget their own responsibility. “Many things lie in our hands. We have international forces in the country, but we still kill each other. This will likely continue after their withdrawal. It’s up to us to stop it,” he says. “If political leaders don’t use this important moment, they will become like all these men in my books. What we need are people who can open their minds to each other, as Sherazuddin and I did. That’s the only way we can rebuild Afghanistan.”

The author is a journalist, author, and the founder of Drone Memorial, a virtual memorial for civilian drone strike victims .