

“End the Secrecy!” – SATIIM Demands Explanation for US Oil Company’s Return to National Protected Land



*Government ignores local communities requests for information

*Defies historic Supreme Court ruling based on country’s constitution and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

The Sarstoon Temash Institute for Indigenous Management (SATIIM) calls all those who care about Belize’s biocultural diversity demand that the government explain what an oil company is doing on protected land.

On October 25 SATIIM learned that the American oil company, US Capital Energy had suddenly re-appeared on protected and Maya land -- without prior notice or consent of the communities.

According to reports, the oil company has been operating for over a week inside the Sarstoon Temash National Park (STNP) in Southern Belize. While the park is officially co-managed with the surrounding Q’eqchi Mayan and Garifuna villages, the government never informed SATIIM that a permit had been issued. The company is wasting no time - a truck equipped for seismic drilling has already arrived along with a drill-ready tractor. Trees were cut for two seismic lines in Sunday Wood village, with rumors of plans to cut more in the village of Crique Sarco.

This is merely the latest ‘surprise’ in a shameful history of secrecy that began one morning in 1997. Five Mayan communities in Southern Belize woke up to learn that the government had declared their ancestral land a national park in 1994. Ever since, these communities have struggled to defend their land at every turn.

Notably, in 2006 they won a temporary injunction against seismic testing in this protected area, where an entirely new ecosystem was recently discovered. Another ruling from the Supreme Court confirmed Maya rights to land and resources and Belize’s obligation to conform to international standards of informed consent established when it signed the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) in 2007.

Nonetheless, the government has kept all dealings with US Capital Energy secret. SATIIM asked for information in several letters to the Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister and Chief Forest Officer. The government has ignored each one.

When SATIIM met with Indigenous leaders Monday 7 November, all villagers expressed outrage and growing concerns that the government and the company did not inform them about the seismic activities. SATIIM demands that the government respect: 1) the rule of law; 2) environmental justice; 3) economic equality; and 4) its obligations under UNDRIP and legal rulings by Belize's highest courts.

Most of all, SATIIM demands the government end the secrecy around US Capital Energy's new operations in Southern Belize. SATIIM and the Indigenous communities have agreed to use any means necessary to bring the government and company in compliance with national and international law.

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