

Southern Affairs



Ecuador Landslide Deepens Virus Crisis as Oil Pipelines Severed for Weeks

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Landslides **severed** (<https://www.eppetroecuador.ec/?p=8339>) Ecuador's two oil pipelines last week, spilling heavy crude into the Coca River in the country's northeastern Amazon region. Now, amid the ongoing coronavirus crisis, pipeline operators OCP Ecuador and Petroecuador are deploying **humanitarian aid** (<https://ocpecuador.com/es/sala-de-prensa/documentacion/boletines/ocp-ecuador-ejecuta-contencion-inicia-fase-de-remediacion-y>) to communities downstream and trying to halt the oil before it reaches the Amazon. Emergency teams are also working to **remediate** (<https://www.eppetroecuador.ec/?p=8361>) environmental damage and rebuild an almost 2km section of piping to quickly reconnect Ecuador's economy to the world, a task that may take weeks, the government said.

While one could blame the pipelines' architects for a lack of imagination and environmental foresight, the damage this time was caused by an emergent wave of erosion that's moving up the Coca River toward the new Coca-Codo Sinclair hydroelectric dam, located about 15km upstream.

The event began in February when the riverbed **collapsed** (<https://es.mongabay.com/2020/02/cascada-san-rafael-desaparecio-en-ecuador/>) above the Cascada San Rafael, the Andean country's tallest waterfall, which disappeared in minutes as the river changed course. Tourists captured the moment in dramatic **videos** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I59rnSOvLwE>), bearing witness to the power of nature to transform

landscapes in an instant. Since then, the riverbed has continued to shift course, taking out the pipelines and threatening to undermine the foundations of the hydroelectric plant itself.

Coca-Codo Sinclair was built by China's state-owned hydropower company, Sinohydro Corp. during the administration of former President Rafael Correa. Plagued by accidents, design flaws, and wildly over-budget, two years after its inauguration in 2016, its turbines were **clogged**

(<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/24/world/americas/ecuador-china-dam.html>) with silt and debris, while thousands of cracks had appeared in its structure, New York Times journalists Nicholas Casey and Clifford Krauss reported at the time. Correa was **convicted** (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/07/world/americas/ecuador-correa-corruption-verdict.html>) on corruption charges last week, his former vice president, Jorge Glas, has been in prison since 2017.

To make matters worse, it may be that the project itself is responsible for the chain of landslides that collapsed the waterfall and took out the pipelines, according to **reporting**

(<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/24/world/americas/ecuador-china-dam.html>) by Mongabay journalist Antonio José Paz Cardona. To be sure, Paz Cardona notes that geologists are still unsure what caused the erosion in a natural area known for its unstable terrain, but the landslides are moving rapidly upstream. As El Comercio's Mónica Orozco writes this week, whatever the cause, the whole project may soon end up in the **river** (<https://www.elcomercio.com/blogs/economia-de-apie/analisis-columnista-coca-codo-esfumarse.html>). The pipelines are already there.

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