

The charges against BP

BP is a respected company in part because it is such a big funder of the cultural sector - Royal Opera House, Tate Britain, National Portrait Gallery etc. And because it is so connected to these respectable institutions, we tend to assume that when their adverts say 'beyond petroleum', they can't possibly be lying...

Yet renewables account for a bit less than 0.3% of the company's turnover (the rest is oil and gas). Even looking at their future plans, and where they're investing, in November they announced (with much fanfare) an increased renewables investment, up to 2.6% of their total - leaving just 97.4% for oil and gas! How many people, given these real figures, would really consider it to be going 'beyond petroleum'?

In fact, this 2.6% could be seen as an investment not really in renewable energy, but in public relations - BP gets great value in terms of reputation for these tiny investments in its "environmental portfolio".

And the rest of the company - the core business - is not just a driver of climate change, it's also inherently violent. BP rides roughshod over communities where it operates, the environment, and even its own employees. Some examples:

COLOMBIA: When BP built its OCENSA pipeline in the mid-1990s, it offered compensation to peasant landowners across whose smallholdings the pipeline crossed, for a strip of farmland just 12.5 metres wide. But soil erosion caused by the pipeline construction blocked springs and diverted streams, rendering land infertile. The military imposed a civilian-free corridor and a curfew along the pipeline which blocked locals' access to their land and, for some, their homes. As a result of the environmental damage and the security presence, a corridor of up to 200 metres wide has in fact been taken away from landowners. Overall, instead of having a narrow strip of land temporarily disturbed by construction, some peasants have lost the use of their entire holdings, have left their homes and had to move to the city slums where they are now living in dire poverty. The landowners tried to obtain fair compensation through the Colombian courts, until their lawyer received death threats from paramilitary groups; they are now appealing to UK courts. BP is fighting their claims all the way. See www.colombiasolidarity.org.uk

The OCENSA pipeline has also been at the centre of horrific institutional violence, including assassinations, beatings and disappearances. These have been carried out by the Colombian army, with which BP has a close relationship, and paramilitary groups, which the army mostly condones. BP has provided equipment and funds to the army to defend its pipeline. BP's security contractors have been accused of training Colombian police in lethal operations and of passing to the army details of local peasant and union campaigners, many of whom have later been targeted. See www.carbonweb.org/documents/chapter11.pdf

GEORGIA: In November 2002, the Georgian Environment Minister said she could not approve the routing of BP's Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline through an important National Park, as to do so would violate Georgia's environmental laws. BP put pressure on the Minister, through then President Shevardnadze. Ultimately, on the day of the deadline, the President called the Minister into his office, and kept her there until she signed, in the early hours of the morning. Part of the reason for her weak bargaining position was that two years earlier Georgia had signed BP's legal agreement for the project, which set a deadline for environmental approval within 30 days of the application and stipulated that the contract had a higher status than other Georgian laws. The environment laws the Minister referred to were irrelevant. No longer able to fight the illegal routing, she fought for stricter environmental conditions (eg numbers of valves, leak detectors etc) in BP's construction permit, in order to protect the National Park as well as possible. Yet two years later,

as BP carried out the construction through the National Park, it did so without complying with these conditions. It had translated the permit into English for its contractors, deliberately excluding the conditions. The Georgian government ordered BP to stop work, which the company ignored - it was only when they brought in the police that work actually stopped. Construction was suspended for two weeks; it finally restarted after a meeting between Georgian President and US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, in which increased US military aid for Georgia was agreed. See www.baku.org.uk

IRAQ: BP has been keen to get access to the world's second largest oil reserves, in occupied Iraq. Before the 2003 invasion, BP's Chief Executive called for a "level playing field" - meaning that the spoils of war should go equally to British as well as American oil companies. When the immediate post-invasion privatisation of Iraq's oil failed, BP co-funded a lobbying effort (working with the British government and the IMF) to press for Iraq's reserves to be handed over to the control of multinational oil companies. This would be a clear break from standard practice in the Middle East (and in Iraq since 1972) where oil production is in the public sector; it would deprive the struggling Iraqi government of hundreds of billions of dollars of revenue, and would almost certainly exacerbate the insurgency. See www.crudedesigns.org

TURKEY: In spite of the Colombia controversies, BP is now repeating its negligent attitude to human rights in Turkey, in its BTC pipeline (construction is expected to be completed in summer 2006). There has been huge discrimination in compensation payments for land, against the landowners of the Kurdish ethnic minority, with some receiving no compensation at all due to exploitation of loopholes in Turkish expropriation law. Others have stated that their land payment per square metre is equivalent to the price of 8 packets of chewing gum. Like in Colombia, large areas used by the pipeline (eg in access roads) have not even been considered for compensation. There are now cases at the European Court of Human Rights, calling for full and fair compensation.

Pandering to the Turkish government, BP has refused even to recognise the Kurds as an ethnic group, referring at best to "households that speak Kurdish language", and disingenuously suggesting that they are affected in exactly the same way as "households that speak Turkish" (because the pipeline requires the same width of land). Against a background of decades of systematic abuses against the Kurds, there are serious fears that protecting the pipeline will be used as an pretext for Turkish security forces to raid Kurdish homes, arrest, torture and disappear community leaders. Already, one human rights defender, who has worked to advise landowners of their rights to compensation, has been arrested at least twice on jumped up charges, and badly beaten in custody. See www.baku.org.uk

UK/worldwide: BP has been at the forefront of pressuring governments to charge lower taxes and royalties for BP's extraction of their non-renewable resources, as well as repeatedly exploiting tax loopholes. Indeed, it is to a large extent on this basis that BP's Chief Executive John Browne is so widely respected in the City - he has provided profits to shareholders at the expense of public budgets. What is more surprising is that BP is so respected by the general public and even by governments, when it is not a sufficiently responsible corporate citizen to pay fair taxes. Again, this relates to sponsorship of the arts, as well as of educational and other community initiatives - for a few tens of millions of dollars of sponsorship, BP can buy respectability, helping it get away with billions of dollars of savings on non-payment of taxes. See www.carbonweb.org/documents/chapter8.pdf

USA: Since it started operating in Alaska in the 1970s, BP has consistently flouted environmental and safety regulations, and ignored warnings of impending disasters. Sadly, several of these warnings have been realised, with major spills and leaks, and a number of serious accidents causing injury to BP's workforce. (See www.alaskaforum.org and www.anwrnews.com). In March 2005, an explosion at BP's refinery in Texas City killed 15 workers and injured up to 500. Investigations by regulators subsequently found "systematic lapses" in BP's safety culture. It later emerged that two and a half years before the disaster, a contractor had

proposed to attach a flare to the vent stack - a measure which would have prevented the explosion; BP refused, as it had not studied the safety of the stack, in spite of legal requirements that it should have done. (See <http://www.chron.com/content/chronicle/special/05/blast/index.html>)

These are just a few illustrative stories. Most are indicative of systemic attitudes throughout the company, not just isolated incidents. For example, the Texas City incident was very similar to incidents a few years earlier (including ignored warnings, breaches of regulations, and subsequent dangers to workers) at BP's plant in Grangemouth and offshore in the North Sea. I could also talk about deliberately neglecting spill prevention and health and safety in the BTC pipeline, about negligent attitude to human rights in West Papua and in China, discrimination against workers in UAE and in Azerbaijan etc. etc.

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