

BBC NEWS

Whistleblower reveals oil giant's 'awful' pollution

Owen Pinnell - BBC Eye Investigations

Thu, March 20, 2025 at 5:29 a.m. GMT-5 · 9 min read



An iridescent film could be seen on the water surface in some places the BBC visited [BBC]

Colombian energy giant [Ecopetrol](#) has polluted hundreds of sites with oil, including water sources and biodiverse wetlands, the BBC World Service has found.

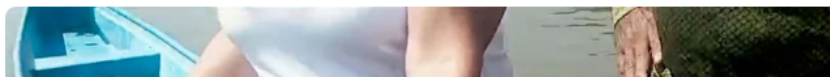
Data leaked by a former employee reveals more than 800 records of these sites from 1989 to 2018, and indicates the company had failed to report about a fifth of them.

The BBC has also obtained figures showing the company has spilled oil hundreds of times since then.

[Ecopetrol](#) says it complies fully with Colombian law and has industry-leading practices on sustainability.

The company's main refinery is in Barrancabermeja, 260km (162 miles) north of the Colombian capital Bogota.

The huge cluster of processing plants, industrial chimneys and storage tanks stretches for close to 2km (1.2 miles) along the banks of Colombia's longest river, the Magdalena – a water source for millions of people.





Yuly Velásquez says manatees have been among dead animals found in the Barrancabermeja area [Yuly Velásquez]

Members of the fishing community there believe oil pollution is affecting wildlife in the river.

The wider area is home to endangered river turtles, manatees and spider monkeys, and is part of a species-rich hotspot in one of the world's most biodiverse countries. Nearby wetlands include a protected habitat for jaguars.

When the BBC visited last June, families were fishing together in waterways criss-crossed by oil pipelines.

One local said some of the fish they caught released the pungent smell of crude oil as they were cooked.



A fisherman pulled up a clump of vegetation caked in dark sediment, which Ms Velásquez says is a sign of oil pollution [BBC]

In places, a film with iridescent swirls could be seen on the surface of the water - a distinctive signature of contamination by oil.

A fisherman dived down in the water and brought up a clump of vegetation caked in dark slime.

Pointing to it, Yuly Velásquez, president of Fedepesan, a federation of fishing organisations in the region, said: "This is all grease and waste that comes directly from the [Ecopetrol](#) refinery."

[Ecopetrol](#), which is 88% owned by the Colombian state and listed on the New York Stock Exchange, rejects the fishers' claims that it is polluting the water.

In response to the BBC's questions, it says it has efficient wastewater treatment systems and effective contingency plans for oil spills.



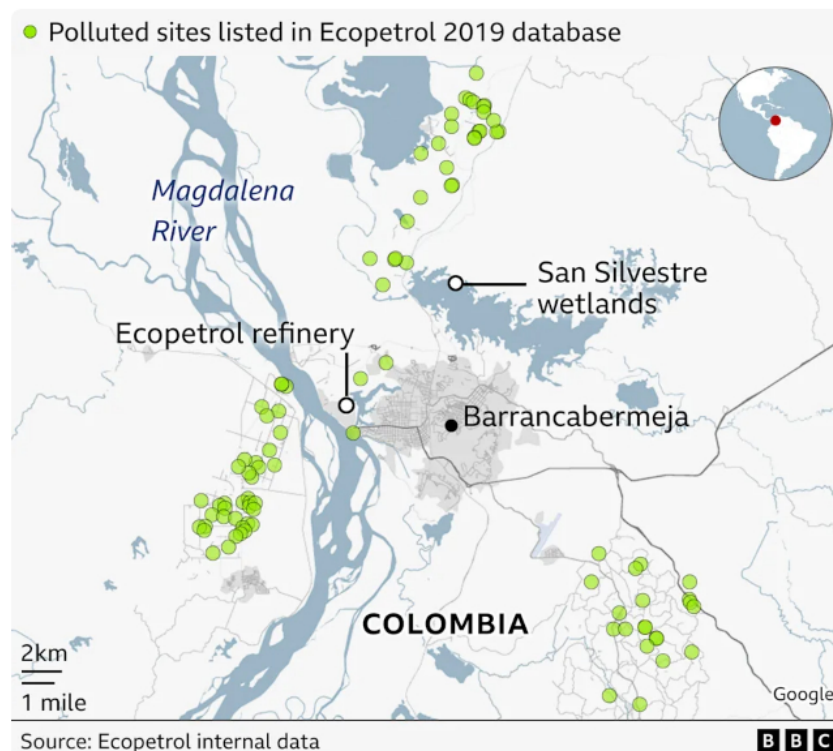
Mr Olarte says he realised "something was wrong" soon after joining [Ecopetrol](#) [BBC]

Andrés Olarte, the whistleblower who has shared the company's data, says pollution by the firm dates back many years.

He joined [Ecopetrol](#) in 2017 and started working as an adviser to the CEO. He says he soon realised "something was wrong".

Mr Olarte says he challenged managers about what he describes as "awful" pollution data, but was rebuffed with reactions such as: "Why are you asking these questions? You're not getting what this job is about."

He left the company in 2019, and shared a large amount of company data with US-based NGO the Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA) and later with the BBC. The BBC has verified it came from [Ecopetrol's](#) servers.



[BBC]

One database he has shared, dated January 2019, contains a list of 839 so-called "unresolved environmental impacts" across Colombia.

Ecopetrol uses this term to mean areas where oil is not fully cleaned up from soil and water. The data shows that, as of 2019, some of these sites had remained polluted in this way for over a decade.

Mr Olarte alleges that the firm was trying to hide some of them from Colombian authorities, pointing to about a fifth of the records labelled "only known to **Ecopetrol**".

"You could see a category in the Excel where it lists which one is hidden from an authority and which one is not, which shows the process of hiding stuff from the government," says Mr Olarte.

The BBC filmed at one of the sites marked "only known to **Ecopetrol**", which was dated 2017 in the database. Seven years later, a thick, black, oily-looking substance with plastic containment barriers around it was visible along the edge of a section of wetland.



The BBC saw a black, oily-looking substance and containment barriers at one of the sites listed in the database as "only known to **Ecopetrol**" [BBC]

Ecopetrol's CEO from 2017 to 2023, Felipe Bayón, told the BBC he strongly denied suggestions that there was any policy to withhold information about pollution.

"I say to you with complete confidence that there is not, and was not any policy nor any instruction saying, 'these things can't be shared'," he said.

- If you are outside of the UK, watch [Colombia: Petroleum, Pollution and Paramilitaries](#) on YouTube

Mr Bayón blamed sabotage for many oil spills.

Colombia has a long history of armed conflict, and illegal armed groups have targeted oil facilities - but "theft" or "attack" are only mentioned for 6% of the cases listed in the database.

He also said he believed there had been a "significant advance" since then in solving problems that lead to oil pollution.

However, a separate set of data shows **Ecopetrol** has continued to pollute.

Figures obtained by the BBC from Colombia's environmental regulator, the Autoridad Nacional de Licencias Ambientales (Anla), show **Ecopetrol** has

reported hundreds of oil spills per year since 2020.

Asked about the 2019 database of polluted sites, [Ecopetrol](#) admits it has records of 839 environmental incidents, but disputes that all of them were classed as "unresolved".

The firm says 95% of polluted sites that have been classed as unresolved since 2018 have now been cleaned up.

It says all pollution incidents are subject to a management process and are reported to the regulator.



[Ecopetrol](#)'s main refinery stretches along on the banks of the Magdalena River near Barrancabermeja [BBC]

The data from the regulator includes hundreds of spills in the Barrancabermeja area where Ms Velásquez and the fishers live.

The fisherwoman and her colleagues have been monitoring biodiversity in the area's wetlands, which feed into the Magdalena River.

She said there had been a "massacre" of fauna. "This year, there were three dead manatees, five dead buffalo. We found more than 10 caimans. We found turtles, capybaras, birds, thousands of dead fish," she said last June.

It is not clear what caused the deaths - the El Niño weather phenomenon and climate change may be factors.

A 2022 study by the University of Nottingham lists pollution - from oil production and other industrial and domestic sources - as one factor among several, including climate change, that are degrading the Magdalena river basin.

Mr Olarte left [Ecopetrol](#) in 2019. He moved to his family home near Barrancabermeja, and says he met with an old contact to ask about job openings. Soon afterwards, he says an anonymous caller rang his phone threatening to kill him.

"In the call I understood they thought I had put complaints against [Ecopetrol](#), which was not the case," he says.

Mr Olarte says more threats followed, including a note that he showed to the BBC. He does not know who made the threats and there is no evidence that [Ecopetrol](#) ordered them.

Ms Velásquez and seven other people also told the BBC they had received death threats after challenging [Ecopetrol](#).

She said an armed group had fired warning shots at her house and spray-painted the word "leave" on the wall.



Ms Velásquez told the BBC she had been threatened and her house shot at [BBC]

The fisherwoman is now protected by armed bodyguards paid for by the government, but the threats have continued.

Asked about the threats Mr Olarte described, the former CEO Mr Bayón said they were "absolutely unacceptable".

"I want to make it totally clear... that never, at any time, was there any order of that sort," Mr Bayón said.

Ms Velásquez and Mr Olarte both know the risks are real. Colombia is the most dangerous country in the world for environmental defenders, according to the NGO Global Witness, with 79 killed in 2023.

Experts say such killings are linked to Colombia's decades-long armed conflict, in which government forces and paramilitaries allied to them have fought left-wing rebel groups.

Despite government attempts to end the conflict, armed groups and drug cartels remain active in parts of the country.

Matthew Smith, an oil analyst and financial journalist based in Colombia, says he does not believe [Ecopetrol](#) managers are involved in threats by armed groups.

But he says there is an "immense" overlap between former paramilitary groups and the private security sector.

Private security firms often employ former members of paramilitary groups and compete for lucrative contracts to protect oil facilities, he says.

Mr Olarte has shared internal [Ecopetrol](#) emails showing that in 2018, the company paid a total of \$65m to more than 2,800 private security companies.

"There is always that risk of some sort of contagion between the private

security companies, the types of people they employ, and their desire to continually maintain their contract," Mr Smith says.

He says this could potentially even include kidnapping or murdering community leaders or environmental defenders in order to "ensure that **Ecopetrol's** operations proceed smoothly".



Fishing is an important livelihood for many in the Barrancabermeja area [BBC]

Mr Bayón said he was "convinced that the checks and due diligence were done" regarding the company's relationships with private security companies.

Ecopetrol says it has never had relationships with illegal armed groups. It says it has a strong due diligence process and carries out human rights impact assessments for its activities.

The BBC contacted other members of **Ecopetrol's** former leadership from the time of Mr Olarte's employment, who strongly deny the allegations in this report.

Now living in Germany, Mr Olarte has been submitting complaints about **Ecopetrol's** environmental record to the Colombian authorities and the company itself - so far, without meaningful result.

He has also been in a series of legal cases against **Ecopetrol** and its management, related to his employment there, which are as yet unresolved.

"I did this in defence of my home, of my land, of my region, of my people," he says.

Mr Bayón stressed the economic and social importance of **Ecopetrol** to Colombia.

"We have 1.5 million families who don't have access to energy or who cook with firewood and coal," he said. "I believe that we must continue to rely on clean production of oil, gas, all energy sources, to transition without ending an industry that is so important for Colombians."

And Ms Velásquez remains determined to continue speaking out, despite the threats.

"If we don't go fishing, we don't eat," she said. "If we speak and report, we

are killed... And if we don't report, we kill ourselves, because all these incidents of heavy pollution are destroying the environment around us."



[BBC]

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BBC

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'IT'S A CATASTROPHIC LOSS'

We speak to former River City star about what axing show will mean for industry

Ann Fotheringham

A FORMER River City star has said the is "shockingly gutted" to leave the long-running drama which will end next year.

Lesley Hest, who played police officer Leo Cogan for almost six years, said: "I feel so sad for Scotland, to have lost this show, and for everybody working on it."

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Sport, pages 54-55

'Big plans' for the finale as River City to go out with a bang
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THE SCOTSMAN

Fears welfare reform will be 'severe' blow to Scots budget

◆ SNP minister's warning over 'devastating' impact of measures

Alister Grant and Alexander Brown

UK welfare reforms may have a "severe" impact on the Scottish Government's budget, a senior SNP minister has warned.

Work and pensions secretary Liz Kendall told MPs there was a need for a "pro-work" system, criticising the status quo for "failing the very people it is supposed to help and holding our country back".

However, charities claimed the proposed changes were "immoral and devastating", with several Labour MPs also standing up in the House of Commons to criticise the changes.

And in Edinburgh, Shirley-Anne Somerville, the Scottish Government's Social Justice Secretary, accused UK Labour ministers of showing an "utter

lack of regard" for Scotland's devolved social security system.

She said the changes will have a "devastating" impact on disabled people.

The measures announced include scrapping the work capability assessment for Universal Credit, and an above-inflation rise in the standard allowance for universal credit by 2029-30 - adding £775 in cash terms annually.

However, new claims from April 2026 will see the rate of the health element almost cut in half, from £97 a week to £50, and those already claiming having their amount frozen at £97 per week until 2029-30.

There were also plans to tighten the eligibility for personal independence payment (PIP), with a higher threshold for someone to qualify. With

Continued on page 4



Medal's a fair Kop for Hansen

Scotland and Liverpool legend Alan Hansen after being made Member of the Order of the British Empire at Windsor Castle for services to association football and to broadcasting

Trump and Putin agree immediate ceasefire on energy and infrastructure

Aamer Madhani

US President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin agreed during a lengthy call yesterday to an immediate pause in strikes against energy and infrastructure targets in the Ukraine war.

The Russian leader stopped short of backing a broader 30-day pause in fighting that the US administration is pressing for.

The White House described it as the first step in a "movement to peace" it hopes will eventually include a maritime ceasefire in the Black Sea and a full and lasting end to the fighting.

The White House said negotiations would "begin immediately" in the Middle East on those steps.

Shortly after the call between Mr Trump and Mr Putin, air raid alerts sounded in Kyiv, followed by explosions in the city.

Local officials urged people to seek shelter.

It was not immediately clear whether Ukraine is on board with the limited ceasefire plan.

Ukrainian officials had

Continued on page 8

[BBC]



'America's genocide'

Rector of Scots university slams US as it backs deadly Israeli strikes on Gaza
● More than 400 people killed but Labour say, 'No we won't ban arms sales'

'AN ACT OF CRUELTY'



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'Reasonable precautions' could have prevented three deaths in Scots hospitals

SHERIFF RULES: NEWBORN BABIES DID NOT NEED TO DIE

By Richard Elias and Connor Gordon
THE lives of three new-born babies could have been saved if "reasonable precautions" had been put in place, a sheriff has ruled.
Yesterday, a sheriff issued a raft of recommendations which she hoped would prevent any repetitions of the deaths of
TURN TO PAGE 4



Gwyneth back on the big screen with salty new look
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Putin keeps ceasefire hopes on a knife edge

Russia pauses attacks but demands frustrate Kyiv

David Charter Washington
Marc Bennetts

President Putin agreed to halt attacks on Ukraine's energy infrastructure last night but insisted on a range of demands that frustrated President Trump's hopes of a general ceasefire. The Russian leader said he had ordered a 30-day pause on targeting Ukrainian power supplies and agreed to further peace talks. But there was no sign of agreement on the US proposal to end all the fighting, which Ukraine signed up to last week and which Trump was keen to announce. Following the leaders' phone call, which lasted two hours, the White House said that Putin had agreed to "technical negotiations on implementation of a maritime ceasefire in the Black Sea, full ceasefire and permanent peace" to begin in the Middle East.

Ukraine, he continued, Zelenytska said that there was a build-up of Russian forces near the Stryi region, the part of Ukraine that borders the Kursk region of Russia, where intense fighting continues. Despite Ukrainian fears that Putin is strong, Trump along to buy time for further military advances, the US president insisted there was strong momentum towards a cessation of fighting. "My phone conversation today with President Putin of Russia was a very good and productive one," Trump posted afterwards on his Truth Social site. "We agreed to an immediate Ceasefire on all Energy and Infrastructure, with an understanding that we will be working quickly to have a Complete Ceasefire and, ultimately, an END to this very horrible War between Russia and Ukraine. "Many elements of a Contract for Peace were discussed, including the fact that thousands of soldiers are being killed, and both President Putin and President Zelenytska would like to see it end. That process is now in full force and effect, and we will, hopefully, for the sake of Humanity, get the job done!"



Liz Kendall, the work and pensions secretary, leaving Downing Street yesterday after a cabinet meeting to discuss the government's £3 billion of welfare cuts

Benefits trap has wreaked terrible cost, says Stamer

Chris Smyth Whitehall Editor
Steven Swinford Political Editor

The spiralling cost of sickness and disability benefits is having a "devastating" impact on the public finances while "wreaking a terrible human cost", Sir Keir Starmer has said as he announced a £3 billion package of welfare cuts. Writing in The Times, the prime minister argues that the benefits system is "actively incentivising" people not to work and represents an "affront to the values of our country". He says "those who can work should". More than two million people are likely to see reductions in their income as a result of changes to incapacity and disability benefits set out yesterday. A million people are set to be affected by tougher tests to qualify for personal independence payments (PIPs), the main disability benefit, which are meant to compensate for the extra costs of disability and are not linked to work. Tightening eligibility criteria will account for the bulk of the savings. The move came as Ian Murray, the Scottish secretary, said that an "unacceptable" number of Scots were languishing on benefits and the SNP should work with the UK government to get people back to work. Under rules requiring people to demonstrate a greater degree of difficulty than was previously required in at least one activity of daily life, many who struggle with washing, dressing and eating will be denied support or see payments cut by between 14,300 and 16,300 a year. The cost of sickness and disability benefits is forecast to rise from £10 billion to £30 billion by the end of the decade, which Starmer says has had a "devastating" impact on the public finances. He says: "It has wreaked a terrible human cost. Young people shut out of the labour market at a formative age. People with complex long-term conditions, worried by a single assessment. People who want to return to work, yet can't access the support they need. All this is happening at scale and it is indefensible. An affront to the values of our country and Labour's history." Continued on page 2

IN THE NEWS

Boat Race barney Cambridge has accused its rival Oxford of "slimy" tactics for barring a star rower from the Boat Race because of a PGCE. It is not a "degree-level qualification". Page 3	ONS goes virtual Virtual reality headsets and yoga mats have been added to the national basket of goods and services used by the Office for National Statistics to calculate inflation. Page 8	Kennedy unblocked US justice department lawyers are rushing to review a trove of documents relating to the Kennedy assassination before their declassification by President Trump. Page 14	Kim's bitcoining it Hackers have made North Korea the world's third largest holder of bitcoin after the US and Britain. The "Lazarus" hackers hold 13,900 bitcoins, worth £886 million. Page 26	Dead bear's revenge An 81-year-old hunter has gone on trial in France for killing a protected animal after shooting dead the killing bear that was mauling him in the Pyrenees. Page 29
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Putin rejects Trump's ceasefire

Russia agrees to halt some attacks but will continue front-line offensive after leaders' phone call

By James Clapp senior editor
YAKIMIR PUTIN has rejected Donald Trump's proposal for an immediate ceasefire in Ukraine after a "brief" phone call between the two presidents. Instead, the Russian leader agreed to allow a 30-day pause on energy and infrastructure attacks, but insisted on a range of demands that frustrated President Trump's hopes of a general ceasefire. The Russian leader said he had ordered a 30-day pause on targeting Ukrainian power supplies and agreed to further peace talks. But there was no sign of agreement on the US proposal to end all the fighting, which Ukraine signed up to last week and which Trump was keen to announce. Following the leaders' phone call, which lasted two hours, the White House said that Putin had agreed to "technical negotiations on implementation of a maritime ceasefire in the Black Sea, full ceasefire and permanent peace" to begin in the Middle East. Ukraine, he continued, Zelenytska said that there was a build-up of Russian forces near the Stryi region, the part of Ukraine that borders the Kursk region of Russia, where intense fighting continues. Despite Ukrainian fears that Putin is strong, Trump along to buy time for further military advances, the US president insisted there was strong momentum towards a cessation of fighting. "My phone conversation today with President Putin of Russia was a very good and productive one," Trump posted afterwards on his Truth Social site. "We agreed to an immediate Ceasefire on all Energy and Infrastructure, with an understanding that we will be working quickly to have a Complete Ceasefire and, ultimately, an END to this very horrible War between Russia and Ukraine. "Many elements of a Contract for Peace were discussed, including the fact that thousands of soldiers are being killed, and both President Putin and President Zelenytska would like to see it end. That process is now in full force and effect, and we will, hopefully, for the sake of Humanity, get the job done!" Putin told Trump that Ukraine and Russia would each exchange 175 prisoners today and pledged to return more than 23 seriously wounded Ukrainian soldiers. Zelenytska later confirmed the prisoner swap, saying it was a planned exchange. Similar deals have taken place throughout the conflict. Zelenytska warned that Ukraine would "respond" if Russia launched attacks on its energy facilities during the 30-day pause. The phone call was held after Washington and Kyiv agreed a proposal for a 30-day ceasefire that would cover all energy and infrastructure attacks. Mr Trump had signed the deal after the phone call. The deal did not agree to a full ceasefire, but it did agree to a 30-day pause on energy and infrastructure attacks. The deal would have been announced by 11.30pm.



Australia's oldest, a city near the border with Kazakhstan. However, Russian missiles in Ukraine energy infrastructure have also caused damage to the city in the previous weeks since the invasion three years ago. Glen Grant, a former UK defence attaché to the Baltics, and one-time adviser to Ukraine's defence ministry, said: "Russia wanted a step on attacks on energy infrastructure, so Kyiv was doing more damage to Russia through that than the other way around. He added: " Likewise, Russia hasn't just one step into the Black Sea but almost a year because Ukraine's naval bases have been damaged there too." The prisoner exchange was preferable in the long-term, he added, because it meant the US president might come to "change his mind" and agree to a ceasefire, and aid and military support to Ukraine would be cut off. That would force Europe to try to do the job, which seems almost impossible to do. European diplomats, who see approval of Ukraine's exclusion from the "Putin needs to stop attacks on energy, as Kyiv is doing more damage to Russia than the other way around" journal talks, told The Telegraph the phone call "did have some success". In Berlin, Germany's Foreign Minister, said Mr Zelenytska had "made a good point" for the ceasefire. "Mr Zelenytska's Ukraine can count on us, that Ukraine can count on Europe and that we will see [the] force," the German chancery chief said ahead of an EU summit tomorrow. Mr Macron and Sir Keir Starmer are trying to form a coalition of willing nations, backed by EU security guarantees, to police an eventual pause in Europe. These plans were dealt a blow by George Milos, Ukraine's former minister, yesterday, who has sought to make his bid for leadership between Mr Trump and the EU. He said the plan for a European non-energising force over "talks, ceasefires and incentives". Mr Macron also met Friedrich Merz, the German leader, and said he was "definitely" Mr Zelenytska in direction, but said he would not be involved in the talks. He said the plan for a European non-energising force over "talks, ceasefires and incentives".

