

Bolivia: NGOs Wrong on Morales and Amazon

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What's Behind the Highway Protests in Bolivia?

Opponents of a proposed highway in Bolivia seized government minister David Choquehuanca September 24 in a dangerous escalation of conflict over the plan [1]. Choquehuanca had come to negotiate with the protesters. The marchers forcibly occupied territory of a community that supports the highway, wounding a policeman in the process.

Freed after several hours, Choquehuanca said his release "is a sign that [protesters] want to resolve matters through negotiation.

Many northern environmentalists view the conflict in Bolivia as a simple debate between economic development and environmental protection. The reality is much more complex: read this article before you sign a petition.

The article below, by Federico Fuentes, is taken from Bolivia Rising. Subheads and links have been added.

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Bolivia: NGOs Wrong on Morales and Amazon

By Federico Fuentes

Statements, articles, letters and petitions have been circulating on the Internet for the past month calling for an end to the "destruction of the Amazon."

The target of these initiatives has not been transnational corporations or the powerful governments that back them, but the government of Bolivia's first indigenous president, Evo Morales.

At the centre of the debate is the Bolivian government's controversial proposal to build a highway through the Isiboro Secure National Park and Indigenous Territory (TIPNIS).

TIPNIS, which covers more than 1 million hectares of forest, was granted indigenous territory status by the Morales government in 2009. About 12,000 people from three different indigenous groups

live in 64 communities within TIPNIS.

On August 15, representatives from the TIPNIS Subcentral that unites these communities, as well as other indigenous groups, began a march to the capital city, La Paz, to protest against the highway plan.

International petitions have been initiated declaring support for this march and condemning the Morales government for undermining indigenous rights.

The people of TIPNIS have legitimate concerns about the highway's impact. There is also no doubt the government has made errors in its handling of the issue.

Unfortunately, petitions such as the one initiated by international lobby group Avaaz and a September 21 letter to Morales signed by over 60 environmental groups mostly outside Bolivia misrepresent the facts and misdirect their fire.

They could inadvertently aid the opponents of the global struggle for climate justice.

Avaaz warns that the highway "could enable foreign companies to pillage the world's most important forest." But it fails to mention the destruction that is already happening in the area, in some cases with the complicity of local indigenous communities.

On the other hand, the Morales government has promised to introduce a new law, in consultation with communities within TIPNIS, to add new protections for the national park.

The proposed law would set jail terms of between 10 to 20 years for illegal settlements, growing coca or logging in the national park.

Also, Avaaz claims that "huge economic interests" are motivating Morales' support for the highway. But Avaaz omits the benefits that such a highway (whether it ultimately goes through TIPNIS or not) will bring Bolivia and its peoples.

Goals of highway construction

For example, this 306-kilometre highway linking the departments of Beni and Cochabamba (with only a part of it going through TIPNIS) would expand access to health care and other basic services to isolated local communities that now travel for days to receive medical care.

The highway would also give local agricultural producers greater access to markets to sell their goods. At the moment, these must go via Santa Cruz to the east before being able to be transported westward.

Given Beni's status as the largest meat producing department (state), this would break the hold that Santa Cruz-based slaughterhouses have on imposing meat prices.

The highway would also allow the state to assert sovereignty over remote areas, including some where illegal logging takes place.

It is facts such as these that have convinced more than 350 Bolivian organisations, including many of the social organisations that have led the country's inspiring struggles against neoliberalism, to support the proposed highway.

Many indigenous organisations and communities (including within TIPNIS) support the highway. It is therefore false to describe this as a dispute between the government and indigenous people.

Nor is it a simple conflict between supporters of development and defenders of the environment.

All sides want economic development

All sides in the dispute want greater development and improved access to basic services. The issue at stake is how the second-poorest country in the Americas, facing intense pressure from more powerful governments and corporate forces, can meet the needs of its people while protecting the environment.

Given this, surely it makes more sense for those who wish to defend Bolivia's process of change to support steps towards dialogue, rather than deepening the divisions.

Legitimate criticism can be made of the government's handling of the consultation process. But the Avaaz petition and the letter from environmental groups simply ignore the government's repeated attempts to open discussions with the protesters.

Half the members of Morales' ministerial cabinet, along with many more vice-ministers and heads of state institutions, have traveled to the march route to talk with protesters.

The petitioners don't mention the Morales government's public commitment to carry out a consultation process within the framework of the Bolivian constitution, popularly approved in 2009. Neither do they mention its offer to have the consultation process overseen by international observers selected by protesters themselves.

The government has also remained open to discussing the economic and environmental feasibility of any alternative route that could bypass TIPNIS. No such alternative has been presented yet.

As a result of these initiatives, a number of the TIPNIS communities that had joined the march, as well as representatives from the Assembly of the Guarani People, have since decided to return home. They will continue discussions with the government.

Sadly, the key opponents of the proposed consultation process are among the march leaders, which includes organisations based outside TIPNIS.

These organisations were also the main proponents of a further 15 demands being placed on the government the day the march began.

Questionable demands

Many of these demands are legitimate. But it is alarming that some of the more dangerously backward demands have been ignored or dismissed by international environment groups.

For example, the letter to Morales raises concerns regarding the Bolivian president's statement that "oil drilling in Aguasag National Park 'will not be negotiated'".

Those gas fields represent 90% of Bolivia's gas exports and are a vital source of funds that the Morales government has been using to tackle poverty and develop Bolivia's economy.

The fact that the bulk of gas revenue is controlled by the Bolivian state rather than transnational corporation is the result of years of struggles by the Bolivian masses, who rightfully believe this resource should be used to develop their country.

The concerns of local communities should be, and have been, taken into consideration. But for Bolivia to cut off this source of revenue would have dire consequences for the people of one of the poorest nations in the Americas.

It would, without exaggeration, be economic suicide.

Initially, protesters also demanded a halt to gas extraction in Aguarague. They have retreated on this and are now focused on the question of plugging up unused oil wells due to the contamination this could cause to local water supplies.

Similarly, neither of the Internet statements mentions the protesters' support for the Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD) program.

REDD is a grossly anti-environmental United Nations program that aims to privatise forests by converting them into "carbon offsets" that allow rich, developed countries to continue polluting.

‘Obscure interests’

Some of the biggest proponents of this measure can be found among the NGOs promoting the march. Many of these have received direct funding from the U.S. government, whose ambassador in Bolivia was expelled in September 2008 for supporting a right-wing coup attempt against the elected Morales government.

Rather than defend Bolivia's sovereignty against U.S. interference, the letter denounces the Bolivian government for exposing connections between the protesters and "obscure interests."

These "obscure interests" include the League for the Defence of the Environment (LIDEMA), which was set up with U.S. government funds. Its backers include the U.S. government aid agency, USAID, and the German-based Konrad Adenauer Foundation, which frequently funds actions against governments opposed by the United States and European governments such as Cuba.

Secret U.S. diplomatic cables recently released by WikiLeaks and declassified U.S. government files have conclusively shown that USAID directly targets indigenous communities in a bid to win them away from support for Morales and towards supporting U.S. interests.

Behind these very real interests lies a campaign by rich nations and conservative environmental groups to promote policies that represent a new form of "green imperialism."

After centuries of plundering the resources of other countries, wiping out indigenous populations, and creating a dire global environmental crisis, the governments of rich nations now use environmental concerns to promote policies that deny underdeveloped nations the right to control and manage their own resources.

P.S.

* <http://johnriddell.wordpress.com/2011/09/25/what's-behind-the-highway-protests-in-bolivia/>

* <http://boliviarising.blogspot.com/2011/09/bolivia-ngos-wrong-on-morales-and.html>

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-15048897>