

Indigenous Rights in Bolivia: Conflict deepens over disputed highway

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September 25 will go down as one of the darkest day in Bolivia since Evo Morales was elected as the country's first indigenous president almost six years ago.

After more than 40 days of marching, police officers moved in to repress indigenous protesters opposed to the government's proposed highway that would run through the Isiboro-Secure National Park and Indigenous Territory (TIPNIS).

The controversial highway has been opposed and supported by many of the indigenous and social organisations that make up the support base of the Morales government.

Differences over the project have resulted in tensions escalating between both sides during the past month and particularly in the days leading to the violence. Protesters were set to reach a town where locals were organising a blockade in protest against march demands they felt would negatively impact on them.

After the repression, Morales rejected accusations he was behind events he described as "an abuse committed against our indigenous brothers" and called for an international commission to investigate the incident.

During the police action, which lasted around half an hour, tear gas and rubber bullets sent indigenous marchers, including pregnant women and children, fleeing for safety.

Unconfirmed reports by the media committee of the marchers said one child was killed and that initially several protesters were missing.

A number of march leaders were briefly detained by police, while many more marchers were forced onto buses and sent back home.

Shock and anger at these events led to a wave of mourning and questioning as to how an indigenous-led government could carry out such actions against its own people.

The backdrop to this terrible event is the conflict that has been brewing over months regarding the proposed 306-kilometre highway that would link the departments of Beni and Cochabamba. Currently, the only alternative is the more than 800 kilometre trip that requires first traveling eastwards to the department of Santa Cruz.

Legitimate anger at the failure of the Bolivian government to carry out its obligation in consulting local communities within TIPNIS over the tract of the proposed highway that would cut through their territory, led locals to organise a march onto the capital, La Paz.

By August 15, the march had gained the support of the Confederation of the Indigenous Peoples of Bolivia (CIDOB), which unites the 34 indigenous peoples of Bolivia's eastern lowlands, and important sections of the National Council of Ayllus and Markas of Qollasuyu, which groups together 16 rural indigenous organisations mainly based in the highlands to the west.

That same day, these organisations presented a list including 15 further demands on the government, with issues ranging from improving indigenous health and education to calls for halting gas exploitation in the Aguaragua National Park and the right of indigenous communities to directly receive funds from 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.

REDD is also a policy that has been actively pushed by non-government organisations (NGOs) within Bolivia that receive funding from governments in Europe and the United States and have been supporting the march.

The march also garnered unexpected support from a range of right-wing organisations that have campaigned for years to bring down the Morales government. This includes right-wing parties within parliament and organisations such as the Santa Cruz Civic Committee, which spearheaded the September 2008 coup attempt against Morales.

As protesters began to make their way to La Paz, at least nine attempts at dialogue were made by the government to try and resolve the demands of the marchers.

Among the demands that were agreed to by the government, and noted in a document posted on the CIDOB website on September 19, was implementing "the process of consultation with the indigenous communities of TIPNIS involved with section II of the San Ignacio de Moxos — Villa Tunari Highway, as always in compliance with the [constitution], international norms and the participation of observers."

The government however rejected the possibility of negotiating over the issue of REDD, a policy rejected by the government and participants at the Peoples Summit on Climate Change it hosted in Cochabamba in April 2010.

It also ruled out the possibility of shutting down gas exploitation in Aguaragua National Park as it represents 90% of Bolivia's gas exports and is fundamental to its ability to fund social programs and industrialise the country's underdeveloped economy.

Opposition to some of the protesters' demands also came from other indigenous and campesino groups, such as Bolivia's largest campesino organisation, the Sole Union Confederation of Bolivian Campesino Workers (CSUTCB).

All up, about 350 organisations have come out in support of the highway.

In Yucumo, a town near the La Paz-Beni border where the march was set to go through, the local affiliate of the "colonisers" union — a term used to refer to indigenous Aymara and Quechua campesinos who migrated to the lowlands in search of land to work — threatened to stop the march unless protesters withdrew five demands they believed would affect them

directly.

These included the issue of gas exploitation, disputes over how land reform should proceed, and the protesters' call to stop the building of two further highways, neither of which were to run through TIPNIS and which local colonisers had been demanding be built.

The tension in Yucumo was palpable, as recorded in one of the press statements issued by the protesters on September 18. In it, a journalist notes the hostile and violent reaction he received when he was surrounded by locals chanting, "the media is biased" and "your trying to make us look bad".

They were also angered that an interviewer from the same radio as the journalist had referred to the blockaders as coca-growing supporters of Morales party, the Movement Towards Socialism (MAS) — something they denied and demanded he rectify.

With the march advancing on Yucumo, police stopped anti-highway protesters on September 20 in San Miguel de Chaparina, some eight kilometres away, impeding their advance for days in order to avoid confrontations.

Tensions were also visible elsewhere. Reporting on a pro-TIPNIS rally in La Paz, Dario Kenner wrote a September 24 entry on his blog Bolivia Diary that while support for the marchers was clearly visible "not everyone supports the indigenous march... and tensions are running very high".

Referring to the break out of a fight between opposing forces, Kenner added: "The hostility between groups I witnessed yesterday gives an idea of the polarisation affecting Bolivia at the moment."

Kenner observed it was evidence of "increasing divisions in the popular movement that mobilised since the Cochabamba Water War in 2000 as the TIPNIS conflict has provoked divisions between and within groups that marched together in the past such as: indigenous social movements, campesino social movements, trade unions, urban social movements, MAS supporters, Bolivian NGOs etc".

After several days of protesters being held up in San Miguel de Chaparina, indigenous Foreign Minister David Choquehuanca returned for the second time for dialogue with them and Yucumo locals on September 24.

A key focus of discussion was to resolving the impasse between protesters and blockaders.

A September 24 article in *La Razon* reported on Choquehuanca's meeting with community leaders in Yucumo. Among them was Rene Huasco, who restated his communities opposition to a number of the marchers demands, adding "it is necessary to bring both sides together in order to explain the points in their list of demands that affect us and find solutions."

A September 25 article in *Pagina Siete* on the meeting with the marchers noted that among the options presented by Choquehuanca to calm tensions were continuing dialogue in Quiquibe, on the other side of Yucumo, between committees made up of marchers and blockaders or for the marchers to send a delegation directly to La Paz to dialogue with the government.

According to the same article, “indigenous leaders rejected dialogue with the colonisers” and reiterated their intention to march on La Paz.

Shortly after, as Choquehuanca was about to leave, he was held hostage along with vice-minister Cesar Navarro and police general Edwin Foronda by a group of marchers who proceeded to use them as human shields to break through the police blockade.

With three kilometres to go until reaching Yucumo, the government representatives were released and the march was stopped once again by police barricades.

Choquehuanca told *Pagina Siete*: “I have been obliged to walk together with the brothers and I have said, we should have resolved this in a different, more peaceful manner based on dialogue.

“We will see if I can help in talking with the intercultural brothers [in Yucumo] and hopefully the climate will not be so tense, so hostile such as when the police lines were broken.”

Instead tensions rose, with organisations such as the CSUTCB threatening to march on Yucumo.

This was to be expected, as the day before, state news service ABI had reported comments by CSUTCB leader Rodolfo Machaca stating that his organisation had “declares itself in a state of alert and emergency in the face of the imminent politically-motivated mobilisation and convulsion that is being generated in the country ... we ask our indigenous brothers to sit down and dialogue”.

Another CSUTCB leader, Simeon Jaliri, noted its support for Choquehuanca’s attempt to resolve the situation through dialogue. “Hopefully” nothing will happen to “our brother from the province of Omasuyos, of the Red Ponchos” he said, referring to the legendary militant Aymara grouping in the altiplano, one of the many that Choquehuanca continues to maintain close contact with.

Tensions however boiled over on the afternoon of September 25, when police moved in to break up the protest.

Reporting on the repression, an article published on *Erbol* that day said that at least 500 police officers participated in the action which left numerous protestors injured, with some reports saying that the number was as high as 40.

Reporting directly on the events, an *Erbol* journalist said “there is a lot of nervousness among the police and desperation within the marchers.”

Rodrigo Rodriguez from the National Service of Environmental News (SENA) was quoted in the same *Erbol* article as saying “all the marchers are being repressed, among them women and children who continue to cry, the police say that they are being transported to San Borja. They are also taking away cameras and are not allowing journalists to pass in order to capture images [of the events].”

There have also been some reports of clashes between police and blockaders in Yucumo in both state and private media outlets, though little information has been provided. *La Prensa* reported on September 26 that tear gas was also used there to clear the road.

Confusion and anger seemed to reign the following day, with *La Prensa* reporting a government minister as stating that the Public Ministry had issued the order for police to move in. However, the prosecutor in the ministry overseeing the investigation into the repression denied the claim in a separate *La Prensa* article.

Another *La Prensa* article reported comments by Minister for Communication Ivan Canelas as saying that the government has ordered an investigation as to whether excessive force had been used.

Pagina Siete reported that the general commander of the police Jorge Santiesteban had assured any police officer found to have used excessive force would be punished.

While *Erbol* reported that a vice-minister for mining had come out against the violence, the Minister of Defence Cecilia Chacon issued a public letter of resignation.

She stated that “the measures implemented, far from isolating the right wing, strengthens its ability to act and carry out manipulation within the [march] with the aim of attacking the process of change that has cost the Bolivian people so much.

Finally, on the night of September 26, Morales rejected claims he had ordered the repression and requested that a commission be established involving international organisations, the ombudsman and human rights groups to investigate the violent acts, reported *Erbol*.

“We lament, we repudiate the excesses carried out against the indigenous march,” Morales said. “I do not agree with (this police action), nor with violence, it was excessive, an abuse committed against our indigenous brothers who were marching.”

He added people to consider “what would have happened if this march passed through and encountered the blockade in Yucumo”.

Morales also announced the suspension of section II of the Villa Tunari — San Ignacio de Moxos highway, and called for a national debate on the issue.

This debate, said Morales, would have to be carried out specifically among the people of Beni and Cochabamba in order for the competing groups to be able to resolve this dispute.

Earlier that day in a visit to some of the communities within TIPNIS that support the highway, Morales also spoke of a referendum on the question involving the population of both departments, though little more detail was given.

Angered by the events of the previous day, at least 5000 people march in La Paz in what Fobomade, a NGO that has been supporting the protest, described in a September 26 article on Bolpress as the biggest mobilisation registered to date in solidarity with the march

Furthermore, on September 26 the vice-president of the mobilisation committee of the march was quoted in *La Razon* as saying that once they had recuperated their strength and decided their next steps, the march would restart.

Meanwhile, leaders from a group of MAS dissidents who recently left the government called for the struggle for TIPNIS to be converted into a struggle “for our democracy”, as former vice-minister Alejandro Almaraz put it.

Another former vice-minister, Raul Prada, wrote that the actions had proven the Morales government to be an “anti-indigenous tyranny” that has “lost all legitimacy”.

Juan del Granado from the Movement of the Fearless, which was previously in an alliance with Morales, was quoted in *La Prensa* on September 26 as calling the actions “clearly dictatorial.”

At the same time, spokespeople for the Federation of Campesino Workers of La Paz, FSUTCTKLP, insisted on the need for dialogue between indigenous brothers and sisters in order to avoid violence.

Along with calling on CIDOB to once again sit down to negotiate, the government continued on Monday its dialogue with the Assembly of the Guarani People (APG).

The APG had initially participated in the march but requested on September 2 that the government hold direct dialogue talks with them after they decided to abandon the march.

It is too early to tell what will happen next.

The first test will be on Wednesday September 28, the date for which the Bolivian Workers Central (COB) has called a nation-wide general strike. While the COB’s own ability to mobilise is quite debilitated, the protest could become a convergence point for those opposed to the recent actions by the government.

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