

Bolivia: General Strike Protests Crackdown on Native March

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(IPS) - Bolivia's main trade union declared a 24-hour general strike Wednesday to protest Sunday's police crackdown on indigenous demonstrators who were protesting the construction of a road through a pristine rainforest preserve.

Thousands of members of unions belonging to the Central Obrera Boliviana (COB) held protest marches in Bolivia's main cities Wednesday, and roadblocks have been set up in La Paz, where teachers, doctors and other unions have joined the strike.

Labour Minister Daniel Santalla said there was no reason for the protest measure, since President Evo Morales already announced on Monday that work on the road had been suspended until voters in the affected provinces decided the fate of the project.

But the COB is demanding that Morales completely cancel that stretch of the road being built by Brazil through the Isiboro Sécure National Park and Indigenous Territory (TIPNIS), which is self-governed by indigenous communities.

On Tuesday, Interior Minister Sacha Llorenti became the second minister to resign over the incident. Defence Minister Cecilia Chacon had already resigned on Monday in protest over the police action.

When hundreds of police were called in Sunday to clamp down on the native protesters in Yucumo, in the lowlands 330 km north of La Paz, TV cameras captured images of women with their hands tied and with tape over their mouths and protesters wounded by fierce blows by the police, which drew howls of outrage across the country.

Dozens of protesters, many of them injured in the crackdown, were detained, and on Monday the search continued for adults and children who had fled into the surrounding jungle when the police arrived.

The demonstrators were trying to regroup, to continue the march they began on Aug. 15 from the Amazon jungle to La Paz, to demand a halt to the construction of the road through TIPNIS in central Bolivia.

Llorenti, a powerful minister in the left-wing president's cabinet, had initially blamed a prosecutor, and later his second-in-command, for ordering the police to crack down on the indigenous march. Both of them denied responsibility, although Deputy Minister Marcos Farfan also handed in his resignation.

In addition, the director of the country's migration agency, María René Quiroga, resigned in protest over the violent incident.

Morales, Bolivia's first-ever indigenous president, announced the suspension of work on that stretch of the road until a national debate and a provincial vote are held, and called the police violence

“unforgiveable.”

But the second highest-ranking chief of the Chiquitano people, Emigdio Poiché, told IPS from a sit-in at a cathedral in the central city of Santa Cruz that “We do not believe in the president’s words, and we demand that a law be passed that says the road will not run through indigenous territory.”

Bolivia’s ombudsman, Rolando Villena, visited Yucumo, where he found a scene of desolation and people still searching for some 20 adults and children who were still missing since Sunday.

“We are the legal owners of the land, and it is us who should make the decision on the road,” Isidro Yujo, a grassroots leader from TIPNIS, told IPS, rejecting Morales’s call to a national debate on the issue.

One 177-km stretch of the new road running from northeast to southwest across Bolivia, providing a link between Brazil’s Atlantic coast and Chile’s Pacific coast, is to cross TIPNIS.

The national park covers more than one million hectares and is collectively owned by some 15,000 people from three indigenous groups.

The indigenous peoples of the Amazon region make up 10 percent of the 10 million inhabitants of Bolivia, where over 60 percent of the population are native people, mainly belonging to the Quechua and Aymara ethnic groups concentrated in the western highlands.

The native people of the tropical regions marched for the first time in 1990 - 600 km from the city of Trinidad in the northern province of Beni to La Paz. Since that landmark event, they have held eight other marches, including the current one.

Yujo said Llorenti’s resignation was the ethical thing to do since in his opinion the former minister was responsible for ordering that the march be broken up.

Last week, Llorenti, a former human rights activist, accused the protesters of having ties to former right-wing president Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada (1993-1997 and 2002-2003), who was toppled in his second term by massive popular protests.

Chiquitano chief Poiché said the contract that the Brazilian construction company OAS signed with the Morales administration envisions a road cutting through the heart of TIPNIS.

“The road will cross through our land over our dead bodies,” he said, adding that the marchers are regrouping in Yucumo and will continue on to La Paz, where university students and workers have held demonstrations in solidarity with the indigenous protesters and against the rainforest highway.

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P.S.

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