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## PPP Opposition Scores Victory

*by LADB Staff*

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With no fanfare and scant media coverage, the Inter- American Development Bank (IDB) canceled the construction of a road early in October that would have split the Biosfera Maya, in the northern Peten of Guatemala, up the middle. The bank concurrently withdrew support for related projects among which was the construction of a 22-km road that would have linked El Naranjo in the Peten with tiny Tenosique in the Mexican state of Tabasco. The scrapped plans represented a victory for environmentalist and community-activist groups in Guatemala battling the Vicente Fox-inspired Plan Puebla-Panama (PPP), reported one Mexican newspaper. The roads were part of a scheme to facilitate an Olmec-Maya tourism circuit.

The newspaper Tabasco Hoy called the decision "the first international reversal" for the PPP. These projects were considered key elements of the overall plan. One of the roads would have provided direct access between the Mayan archeological site Tikal and the Parque Nacional El Mirador-Rio Azul on the border between Guatemala and the Mexican state of Campeche. That one was canceled permanently, unless or until the government of Guatemala invests its own funds in the project. The other, on the Mexican side, has already had 100 million Mexican pesos (US\$10 million) invested in it.

According to the Plan, this would have made Tabasco the port of entry to the Central American market, linking the Central, Gulf, North Chiapas, and Yucatan Peninsula regions with Guatemala. A Mexican government document on the subject characterizes the road as having strategic importance because of the free trade agreement among the countries of the Northern Triangle (see NotiCen, 1998-10-01). The document is quoted as saying that the road "represents a great opportunity to increase the flows of tourism related to the Mundo Maya circuit, comprised in Mexico by the states of Tabasco, Chiapas, Yucatan, and Quintana Roo." The great commercial importance (see NotiCen, 2002-07-11) that Mexico placed on the project made its curtailment all the more significant a victory for environmentalists on the Guatemalan side.

For those ecologists, the project meant the loss of a great deal of primary forest that the construction of a two- lane highway would have entailed. The IDB agreed with this assessment. Vice Minister of Communications, Infrastructure, and Housing Julio Galicia said that, despite his agency's plans to go ahead with the construction, the population of the Peten was also against it, even though it would have given them a quicker route to Mexico. The cancellation of these roads will prevent the touristic predation of the most pristine environment remaining in the region, one that has been called one of the marvels of the world.

The Cuenca Mirador, a rain forest sanctuary 160 km north of Santa Elena, Peten, encompasses 2,128 sq km still regarded as one of the few remaining "lungs" of the planet. It is almost entirely conserved in all its biodiversity. At least 20 archeological sites of monumental architecture punctuate the terrain. El Mirador has the largest pyramid on earth.

Environmentalists say that, in addition to uncontrolled tourist invasions, the roads would also have opened the door to wholesale looting of the forest for its wealth of precious hardwoods. Clear-cutting and uncontrolled slash-and-burn agricultural techniques have been shown to be the principal causes of advanced deforestation in the Biosfera Maya in the Peten (see NotiCen, 2002-08-08). Without the new thoroughfares, the people of the area, who have lived by the sustainable harvesting of chicle, xiate, and wood, can still benefit from low-impact tourism, say environmentalists.

The IDB decision came as a surprise in some Guatemalan government quarters. Juan Carlos Ruiz, spokesman for the Ministry of Energy and Mines, whose minister, Raul Archila, is PPP commissioner for Guatemala, said that environmentalists do not understand the Plan, which would be not just infrastructural, but rather one of integrated development.

Carlos Albacte is director of Tropico Verde, the Guatemala-based environmental organization credited with turning the developmental tide on these road-building projects. He said that governmental secrecy about the project encouraged his organization to investigate and to discover its potential for cultural and ecological damage. His research further led the organization to the conclusion that, while President Vicente Fox is generally identified as the Plan's progenitor, the US is also eager to see it come to pass to have a cheap and efficient route through which to serve its Asian markets.

Linked to free trade agreements, a completed Plan Puebla-Panama would create a maquila corridor with ready access to Atlantic and Pacific coasts through which goods could be transported that would pay no taxes. The US Embassy denied the implication with a statement saying that PPP is a Mexican proposal and not one from Washington, adding that the President George W. Bush administration would support development projects but not those that harm the environment and the economy.

### *Strong social opposition unifying across borders*

In Mexico, the Alianza Mexicana por la Autodeterminacion de los Pueblos (AMAP), a group consisting of at least 30 nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), said through its spokesman Martin Velasquez, "There is consensus within the social movement to halt the PPP and all its projects because it was imposed by the governments and tailored to fit the demands of transnational corporations, which was evident from the beginning. The construction of the highways will be stopped because they will ultimately hurt the communities." The opposition includes mobilizations in several countries.

Complaints have been filed with the International Labor Organization (ILO) against the governments, arguing that PPP was promulgated without consultation with affected communities. Indigenous leaders say that the maquilas, hydroelectric projects, dams, and other infrastructure envisioned in the initiative as a whole will integrate their communities into the dynamic of transnational business, subject them to labor exploitation, replace their way of life with miserable wages, and undermine their culture. Even two guerrilla groups have joined the opposition.

In Chiapas, Comandante Marcos of the largely indigenous Ejercito Zapatista para la Liberacion Nacional (EZLN) wrote, "No to the Plan Puebla-Panama! No to anything that means the sale or destruction of the home of the Indians." In Guerrero, the Ejercito Popular Revolucionario (EPR) has issued statements expressing similar sentiments. With this widespread dissent as background, the IDB has begun organizing forums with representatives of civil society, although some groups will not speak to them.

Velasquez said, "The IDB does not have the moral authority to speak because it is married to the Plan Puebla-Panama. It is the project's promoter, which is why we won't speak to them." This suggests that the scuttling of the roads may have surprised protagonists on both sides of the issue. Whereas the governments plan to continue their support for a megaproject that has been called a "corridor of maquilas," the popular movement has knitted into an apparently effective "corridor of resistance."

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