

2-23-2012

Panamas Indigenous Protestors Block Roads in Dispute to End Mineral Exploitation on Their Lands; Clashes Leave One Dead'

Louisa Reynolds

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/la_energy_notien

Recommended Citation

Reynolds, Louisa. "Panamas Indigenous Protestors Block Roads in Dispute to End Mineral Exploitation on Their Lands; Clashes Leave One Dead'." (2012). https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/la_energy_notien/68

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin American Energy Policy, Regulation and Dialogue at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiEn: An Analytical Digest About Energy Issues in Latin America by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact disc@unm.edu.

Panama's Indigenous Protestors Block Roads in Dispute to End Mineral Exploitation on Their Lands; Clashes Leave One Dead

By Louisa Reynolds

Anger against President Ricardo Martinelli's administration boiled over on Jan. 30, as members of the Gnäbe-Buglé indigenous tribe protested after the Asamblea Nacional (AN) took initial steps toward lifting a mining moratorium on their territories.

The Coordinadora por la Defensa de los Recursos Naturales y el Derecho del Pueblo Gnäbe-Buglé, which has called for all mining and hydroelectric projects on indigenous lands to be halted, decided to block a stretch of the Inter-American Highway that joins Panama's western province of Chiriquí with Costa Rica. The next day, the protest had spread to the provinces of Boca del Toro and Chiriquí, 369 km west of Panama City, and sections of the road running through Veraguas province.

This is not the first time indigenous communities have clashed with the government in a bitter dispute regarding the exploitation of natural resources on their lands. In February 2011, unrest broke out in the municipality of San Félix, in Chiriquí, after the Martinelli administration attempted to reform the Código Minero to allow mining and hydroelectric projects on indigenous lands to go ahead.

After a protestor was killed, indigenous representatives agreed to a dialogue with the government, which agreed to scrap the proposed reform. However, this year, President Martinelli once again tried to steer the legislature toward lifting the mining moratorium on indigenous lands. The Gnäbe-Buglé community felt betrayed and swiftly responded by launching a new protest.

Tensions reached a fever pitch after protestors blocked the Inter-American Highway for three consecutive days. While indigenous leaders insisted that they would only lift the blockade if President Martinelli showed up at the scene to negotiate a peaceful solution, Interior Minister

Jorge Ricardo Fábrega called protestors "intransigent" and urged them to allow "a sensible discussion on the proposed bill in the Asamblea Nacional."

Fábrega claimed that the government had kept its word as the AN had approved a special law forbidding mining projects on indigenous lands. What indigenous leaders were now trying to do, he said, was to stretch the agreement to include a ban on hydroelectric dams, which was not part of the original agreement reached in 2011.

Opposition leader Samuel Lewis Navarro of the Partido Revolucionario Democrático (PRD) said that Fábrega's statement was "a threat, an imposition, and a show of authoritarianism by the government." The Martinelli administration retaliated by accusing the opposition of inciting the protest.

However, Organization of American States (OAS) Secretary-General José Miguel Insulza backed Martinelli, saying that the president "had shown that he was willing to engage in dialogue" and urging indigenous leaders to realize "that economic losses as a result of this conflict affect the lives of thousands of Panamanian families".

Student leader killed

On Feb. 5, after five days, with economic losses of US\$2.3 million as a result of the blockade, the government sent riot police to Chiriquí to disperse protestors and reopen the Inter-American Highway. Telephone signals to the areas taken over by protestors had been cut as a pre-emptive measure against sabotage, claimed Security Minister José Raúl Mulino. By then, a number of labor unions such as the construction workers and teachers unions had also joined the protest by staging demonstrations in Panama City.

During the clashes, 26-year-old indigenous student Gerónimo Montezuma was shot dead, 46 protestors were injured, and 40 were arrested, including 10 children. However, authorities insisted that firearms had not been used during the operation and that it was the protestors who were armed and had attacked the police.

An official spokesperson reported that six police agents had been injured and that the protestors had burned the police headquarters in the town of Tolé and had ransacked the Banco Nacional's office in San Félix. Mulino accused indigenous leaders of "trying to impose their will by causing anarchy" and insisted that the police were merely doing their duty by protecting law and order.

By Feb. 5, the police had managed to reopen the highway, where hundreds of drivers had been trapped, and excavators were used to remove trees and other debris from the road. Protestors pelted the police with stones, and they were forced to retreat to the surrounding mountains.

Martinelli refused to visit the scene, as indigenous leaders demanded, and insisted that talks should take place at the presidential palace. He has said that he is willing to leave the

moratorium on mining projects on indigenous lands but will not make any concessions regarding hydroelectric dams. The government insists that the 2011 agreement stated that water resources would be protected but that this does not include a ban on hydroelectric dams.

After the government called for peace talks, indigenous leaders said they would only agree provided the 40 protestors held by the police were set free. Another prerequisite was for the government to end "repression and persecution" against the Coordinadora. They have also requested that evangelical church leaders, the rector of the Universidad de Panama, and the UN's representative in Panama participate in the talks as observers.

Unrest

This is the third time that violent protests have broken out under the Martinelli administration. The first wave of unrest occurred in July 2010, when the government attempted to put forward a series of bills, lumped together as a single piece of legislation, which opponents nicknamed the "ley chorizo" (sausage law). The reform package included, among other things, measures designed to weaken labor unions and modify environmental legislation so that environmental impact studies would no longer be necessary before initiating mining and hydroelectric projects.

Banana-worker unions staged a massive strike in the Changuinola region, in Bocas del Toro province, which left ten protesters dead and hundreds injured. It was the first national strike that Panama had seen in the past decade. In the end, the government was forced to partially withdraw the ley chorizo.