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Panama: Indigenous Demands Fall On Dear Ears

by Louisa Reynolds

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On Oct. 12, the anniversary of Christopher Columbus' discovery of the Americas, known in the region as the Day of Hispanic Heritage but commemorated by aboriginal peoples as the Day of Indigenous Resistance, representatives from Panama's indigenous organizations marched from San Felix, in the province of Chiriquí, to Panama City.

At 5 p.m., the protestors reached Plaza Catedral and headed toward the presidential residence, Palacio de las Garzas, where they hoped to meet with President Ricardo Martinelli and voice their demands, which include ratification of International Labor Organization (ILO) Convention 169 on the Rights of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples, an end to hydroelectric dams, which have displaced aboriginal communities and flooded large sections of their territories in the country's western provinces, and a more socially responsible and ecofriendly tourism industry that respects indigenous way of life.

However, their hopes were dashed when they arrived at Palacio de las Garzas only to be met by the Ministerio de Gobierno y Justicia's director of indigenous affairs, Jose Acosta, who a few weeks earlier had ordered Naso demonstrators to be evicted from Plaza Catedral during a protest against the Bonyic hydroelectric project. Only six indigenous representatives were allowed to enter Palacio de las Garzas. President Martinelli, a conservative supermarket tycoon who swept to victory in May's elections ([NotiCen, May 7, 2009](#)) and ([July 2, 2009](#)), refused to meet them. He also refused to meet representatives from a teachers-union protest on Oct. 9, drawing strong criticism from social organizations and labor unions.

Bonyic dam a major grievance

The Bonyic hydroelectric-dam construction, in the province of Bocas del Toro, in the district of Changuinola near the Costa Rican border, is one of the indigenous communities' main grievances.

Hidroecologica del Teribe S.A., a subsidiary of Colombian corporation Empresas Publicas de Medellin, began constructing the 30-megawatt dam in November 2007. The project includes constructing a 16.3-km highway, which would entail deforestation of a 5-meter-wide area of the Palo Seco forest, as well as an 18-hectare reservoir on the Bonyic River, an important water source for the region's Naso communities.

In 1998, an environmental-impact study was carried out by independent consultants Planeta Panama, but at the time environmental legislation had far more loopholes.

Naso communities have called for a new study with greater participation from local indigenous organizations. In February 2008, the Naso attempted to block the main access route to the Bonyic-project site but were forcibly dispersed by police.

The Ngobe Bugle community suffers a similar plight, as their crops have been destroyed by the AES Changuinola corporation, which was granted a concession to build three reservoirs on the Rio Changuinola, in Bocas del Toro, named Chan 75, Chan 140, and Chan 220, that could flood up to

6,000 ha of forest land. In November 2007, the Naso community tried to prevent AES from bringing machinery into the area by carrying out a peaceful sit-down protest.

The protestors, including women and children, were arrested and sent to Changuinola prison. They were only freed after a group of protestors surrounded police headquarters and forced authorities to release them. "Communities have the right to decide their future.

The problem is that, under the excuse of economic progress, the government has granted licenses for mining and hydroelectric projects without consulting the affected communities," says political analyst Olmedo Beluche. Struggle for territorial autonomy

The International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA) says there are seven indigenous groups in Panama: the Ngabe, Bugle, Bribri, and Naso in the west; and the Kuna, Embera, and Wounaan in the east. In total, there are around 200,000 indigenous Panamanians, who make up 8.4% of the population and occupy 20% of its territory.

Dialys Ehrman, director of the Coordinadora Nacional de Pueblos Indigenas de Panama (COONAPIP), says that one of the most significant achievements in the past 15 years in advancing indigenous rights has been the approval of a law creating five indigenous comarcas (aboriginal territories with a semi-autonomous political organization that fall under the jurisdiction of the national government).

However, the Naso, Bribri and part of the Embera and Wounaan population do not enjoy this status. There are currently two bills in Congress, one to create a new comarca for the Naso Tjer Di, who live near the Costa Rican border, and another to create a comarca for the Embera and Wounaan people who were not included in the comarca created in 1983.

Hector Huertas, a Kuna lawyer from the Centro de Asistencia Legal Popular (CEALP), explains that, although Panamanian law recognizes the collective rights of indigenous people, the government continues to allow timber and mining corporations as well as hydroelectric dams to use these territories under the argument that these lands are state property.

As occurs in other Central American countries, indigenous Panamanians continue to live in poverty and have the worst development indicators. Sociologist Raul Leis says that indigenous people enjoy a higher standard of living outside rather than inside the comarcas, as these territories receive the least public investment.

According to official statistics, in 1997, 95.4% of the indigenous population was living below the poverty line, a figure that increased to 98.4% by 2003. In contrast, in nonindigenous rural areas, poverty decreased from 58.7% in 1997 to 54% in 2003. Added to this, 40% of indigenous Panamanians aged 15 and over are illiterate, far above the national average of 7%.

Ignacio Rodriguez, former director of indigenous policies of the Ministerio de Gobierno y Justicia under the administration of former President Martin Torrijos (2004-2008), says official recognition of indigenous languages, which has paved the way for bilingual education in Panama's public schools, is a significant improvement. However, indigenous leader Pastor Duran points out that the only comarca where indigenous children currently benefit from bilingual education is Kuna Yala, and it has yet to be implemented in the Kuna de Mudugandi and Embera-Wounaan comarcas.

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