

12-5-2008

The Roads of Disintegration in Ecuador

Guest Author

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur>

Recommended Citation

Guest Author. "The Roads of Disintegration in Ecuador." (2008). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur/13740>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiSur by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

The Roads of Disintegration in Ecuador

by Guest

Category/Department: Ecuador

Published: 2008-12-05

[Luis Angel Saavedra is an Ecuadoran social communicator, an analyst in Latin American geopolitics, particularly militarization, access to strategic resources, and effects on indigenous communities. He has published many research papers, the latest an analysis on the US military base at Manta (www.inredh.org/archivos/manta.pdf)].

"The highway hurt us a lot. We didn't think it would be like that," said Galo Quinonez, Afro-Ecuadoran leader of San Lorenzo, a town near the Ecuador-Colombia border on the Pacific coast. He was commenting on the arrival of the palm growers and the destruction of the last tropical-forest reserves in the northern area of Esmeraldas province.

Galo Quinonez was referring to the highway joining the city of Ibarra, in the mountains of northern Ecuador, with the town of San Lorenzo. When inaugurated in September 2002, the road was described as "the fulfillment of a longtime aspiration of San Lorenzo," but it is really the most palpable evidence of the relationship between a highway and the pillaging of the environment.

The history of San Lorenzo is tied to the history of this highway and the destruction of the railway line that ran from San Lorenzo to Ibarra. "When we had the train, tourists came because it was the farthest point on the line," said Quinonez. In the early 1980s, the timber industry came to the town companies like Plywood, Pena Durini, and Robalino to exploit the humid tropical forest. The train was unable to meet the companies' transportation needs, and they opened a road for the huge cargo trucks.

For 10 years, the road was not improved despite requests from the people of San Lorenzo, by then cut off because some stretches of the railroad had been damaged when the road was built. In the mid-1990s, when no trees were left in the forest, the palm-growing businesses began to arrive and to become landowners, buying lands from the Afro-Ecuadoran community at ridiculously low prices.

"People would sell 10 hectares of accessible land to buy a TV and a sound system," said Aquilino Erazo, who refused to sell his land despite pressure from the palm growers. "I abandoned my land so they would not kill me, but I did not sell it, and now it is there, worthless."

Aquilino must ask permission at the entrance of a palm plantation to reach his land. Those who sold their lands now work for the palm growers, for US\$5 a day, and they are now invading lands of the neighboring indigenous communities, like the Chachi and the Awa. "With the arrival of the palm growers came the forestry engineers and the managers. Since they traveled in small cars, the road was paved to accommodate them," said Quinonez.

However, the paved road extended exactly to the entrance of the last palm plantation some distance from the town of San Lorenzo. The townspeople still live on the muddy streets of the town to

which the highway never arrived. From San Lorenzo, the lumber companies built new roads to the exploitation sites in the forest. When they found communities along the way, they repeated the speech about integration and why the people needed the road. "They told us that we could take someone from the community who was seriously ill and get them to a hospital, or that we could take our products to sell in San Lorenzo," said Jose Anapa of the Chachi indigenous community of La Ceiba.

Exchanging a forest for a highway

The leaders of La Ceiba agreed to let the lumber companies exploit their forest in exchange for building the highway that allowed the companies to move closer to other communities such as Sardinas, Balzareno, and Pamabilar. Then the leaders negotiated for building a medical clinic and finally they agreed to turn over the remaining forest in exchange for a truck to transport them and also to transport wood. Marketing the wood would provide money to maintain the vehicle.

Today, the Chachi of La Ceiba are still walking to San Lorenzo, since they do not even own the truck and their forest is gone. The cases of the Awa community of Balzareno and the Afro-Ecuadoran community of Sardinas are even more poignant, because the lumber companies convinced the people that they would be able to go to San Lorenzo on the transport buses that went there. The lumber companies opened a stretch of road for the big trucks to get in, and the trucks could even cross the river that prevented other vehicles like cars from getting to those two communities. "We are still walking, only now we walk on the road," said Felipe Taicuz of Balzareno.

Similar dilemma in oil-rich lands

The same situation is found in the Amazon communities where oil is extracted. The companies convince the communities to accept building a road claiming that it will bring integration with the city, allow them to sell their products and take ill people to hospitals, or be able to send their children to school.

The roads have even penetrated remote and protected areas such as Parque Yazuni, where Petrobras built a road to the areas where it is prospecting. In the Amazon, with the advance of the roads, the settlers came to pressure the indigenous people for their community lands.

Today, large ranches flank the highways, properties of the settlers and former oil workers. The indigenous continue walking on the roads, but all the vehicles that travel on them belong to the oil companies and carry a sign that says, "Carrying passengers is not allowed."

When the communities refuse to give permission to open a road, the businesses have their own methods of obtaining their objective of getting to the extraction sites, as happened with the Awa community. The Awa have more than 116,000 hectares of land, stretching across three provinces in northern Ecuador: Imbabura, Carchi, and Esmeraldas. To get to the most distant Awa communities takes three days walking from any edge of their land. Nevertheless, the experience of the road openings in the Awa communities of Balzareno, Pambilar, and Guadalito caused the Consejo de Gobierno de la Nacionalidad Awa to prohibit road openings into the interior of their territory to conserve what they call "the reserve of life," which is the last intact tropical forest in Ecuador.

Nevertheless, the reserve of life is threatened today by a mining company that has found gold in Tobar Donoso, an Afro-Ecuadoran village on the border with Colombia, which has no access roads because it is surrounded by Awa territory. "We need the highway for communication, to take out our products, to take our sick to the hospital, because out there we have nothing," said Cesar Montano, leader of Tobar Donoso, his use of the old arguments concealing the mining company's interest in building a road to its concessions.

When the Awa Consejo de Gobierno denied permission, the company arbitrarily opened a stretch of road and brought in machinery to exploit the mine. They later met with leaders of the farthest communities, whom they convinced of the need for the road and said that they had the machinery ready, adding that the road construction could generate jobs for the communities.

Three communities accepted the company's offer and broke with the Awa leadership to sign an agreement to allow construction of the road. "As long as I am president, no road will be opened," said Olindo Nastacuaz, president of the Consejo de Gobierno Awa, in a meeting with the mining company representatives and the leaders of the communities who approved the deal.

Now the dissident communities have asked Nastacuaz to come to them and dialogue about the agreement and the road. "I'm not going to go because they have said that they will tie me to a tree until I sign an agreement with the mining company," said Nastacuaz in a meeting in Balzareno in October. They are waiting for a new meeting in Pambilar, scheduled for mid-December, in which both sides are expected to bring all their supporters to help their side prevail. Thus, the roads of communication are not that; they have become real roads of territorial and community disintegration, serving only those needing to exploit existing resources in indigenous, campesino, or Afro-Ecuadoran territory.

-- End --