

## Indigenous Conferences Reject the Hidrovía Mega-project

*"This project doesn't value the rivers, the streams, the forests, the fish, the birds, the Indigenous peoples, nor life. It only values the winnings of a few businessmen."* - First Indigenous Encounter of the Paraguay River Basin

Indigenous peoples who stand to lose their homes and livelihood as the result of the Hidrovía industrial waterway project on the Paraguay-Paraná river system met in October of 1995 to discuss the project's impact on their traditional economies, and to agree on a plan of action against Hidrovía. Nivaclé, Ayoreo, Angaité, Guaná, Guaraní Nandeva, and Guaraní Occidental representatives from the Paraguay and Pilcomayo river basins met separately and came up with a detailed plan of action against a project which they say will spell disaster for the environment and the communities.

The Hidrovía project would require widening and deepening the channels of the Paraguay and Paraná, South America's second largest water system, to allow ocean-going ships access to the port of Cáceres, Brazil, 2,100 miles upstream from the river's mouth near Buenos Aires. Under the plan being studied, the rivers would be channeled, straightened, and dredged, with tributaries of the river blocked off and rock outcroppings in the channel detonated.

Indigenous peoples and environmentalists insist that Hidrovía, nicknamed "Hell's Highway," would devastate the river ecosystems, including the Pantanal wetland (the largest in the world), and by extension, the traditional economies of the Indigenous peoples which are based on fishing. In the meetings, Indigenous leaders protested that Hidrovía threatens to worsen the already precarious living standards of the people dependent on

the river basins and lead to the colonization of nearby lands. "Only 20 percent of Indigenous communities in Paraguay have legal titles to their land, and only a fraction of these are adequate for sustaining a traditional lifestyle," stresses the declaration of the Paraguay basin. "The [Indian] territories of the entire region will experience pressures even greater than those that exist presently due to speculation on the value of land and the establishment of ranching and agricultural industries. The result will be more forced evictions, starting with the riverine populations."

The Indigenous coalitions also stated that they were "extremely worried" at the lack of information and evasive nature of the governmental institutes carrying out the project. This concern was the impetus for the formation of the Rios Vivos coalition, re-grouping 300 NGOs and Indigenous organizations worldwide. In December 1995, following 3 years of pressure to achieve public participation in the Hidrovía process, the Inter-Governmental Committee on Hidrovía (CIH), made up of the states of Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay accepted a proposal from Rios Vivos to provide



The Nivaclé people will be impacted by the Hidrovía project.

Photo: Glenn Switzer, EPA

access to all documents from the feasibility studies of Hidrovía. Nevertheless, CIH continues to state that construction will begin in the next few months. This has fueled doubts by Indigenous organizations and environmental groups that they will have a meaningful role in the decision-making process.

The resolutions of the Paraguay and Pilcomayo Indigenous encounters call for the unification of Indigenous peoples affected by Hidrovía and the joint preparation and publication of a diagnostic of the social and environmental conditions they face. As a counterexample to the official feasibility studies carried out by the governments, the diagnostic would directly involve the leaders of Indigenous communities. Important too is the translation and distribution of information on the

Hidrovía project in all the Indian languages spoken in area of impact. Lastly, they call for an intense and constant Indigenous presence in all of the local, regional, national, and international instances where decisions on Hidrovía are being made. 🐦

*Information compiled from original documents and from World Rivers Review (December, 1996), the newsletter of the International Rivers Network (IRN). For more information, contact:*

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Rio Paraguay-Paraná Watershed

## “May We Dream of a Better Future?”

### A Letter from Indigenous Peoples of the Pantanal to the International Development Bank

The following letter was sent by 180 Indigenous people of the world's largest wetlands, the Mato Grosso Pantanal, to the Inter-American Development Bank, regarding the Bank's support for studies for the Paraguay-Paraná Hidrovía industrial waterway, and for the Pantanal project, both of which will have environmental and cultural impacts on the region, and both of which are being designed and implemented without consultation with the traditional inhabitants of the region.

Aquidauana, Mato Grosso do Sul, Brazil, January 27, 1996

We, the Guatos, Terena, Kaiowa, Bororo, Umotina, Pareci and Kinikináo are the traditional peoples that the Great Creator chose to live in and protect this region of the world. Throughout time, our ancestors taught us to live in harmony with the waters, birds, and plants, as a way of giving thanks and nurturing this gift for our well-being.

With the arrival of the white man came the roads and the railroad, and then came diseases and new customs which were unknown to us. This was the new civilization.

IDB is now financing a large-scale project under the pretext of developing the southern cone. We know that this project is part of a new re-organization of the world economy, which will truly attend only the ambitions of

unscrupulous businessmen, where egotism, nepotism, and political rivalries reign and only the fittest survive.

In this context of the decadence of “modernity,” we Indigenous peoples were never considered, and were instead only victimized.

We were never consulted, but we recommended that this type of ambition must be halted for the good of humanity. Their money must not disrespect and destroy the homes of our people and of the Great Creator.

Our role is to serve the memory of our people and of the Great Creator. Our role is to serve the memory of our ancestors and of our traditions and to defend the Pantanal, because only in this way can we go forward towards the future in search of a better life.

At the First Meetings of Indians of the Pantanal, the Indigenous voice asks: Why do they want to destroy the natural waterway? Who is going to benefit? Who is going to become rich with this? Up to what point is the IDB aware of the threat of destruction and impoverishment which the large-scale projects bring for our people.

We appeal to the Bank to be clear and transparent in its proposals, because our villages are worried. Will we be victims? Or may we dream of a better future?

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