

# Indigenous Peoples Unite Against Pan-American Highway

by Alicia Korten and Dialis Ehrman

Leaders of the Kuna, Embera, Wounaan, Ngobe and Bugle peoples living in the Darien Gap region that borders Colombia and Panama announced that they would oppose any plan to build the Pan-American Highway that did not first obtain their approval. The Indigenous Pan-American Highway Commission (IPAHC), representing over 200,000 Indigenous peoples in Panama, made this declaration in response to growing pressure to complete the highway's Darien Gap link—which international business interests see as critical to facilitating trade between South and North America.

Leaders unanimously agreed to reject construction of the Pan-American Highway, a railroad, or any other project crossing their lands until these lands have been legalized and demarcated. Indigenous people's fears regarding the highway's negative impacts were reinforced by catastrophic flooding in Nov. 1994 which destroyed several Kuna communities situated near the Pan-American Highway, which stretches for roughly 100 miles into the Darien Province. "The night (the Chucunaque River rose) our children had to swim to stay alive, the water came up to the necks of the older people. All our fields and many of our houses were washed away. I have never seen such a flood in my lifetime," explained Horacio Lopez Turino, community leader of Wala. He

and other residents believe that the flood was a consequence of unprecedented deforestation in the last two decades by loggers and cattle ranchers who have used the highway to gain access to the region's resources.

Pressure to complete the road has increased in recent months. Broad agreement at the Summit of the Americas last December to unite the Americas into a free trading zone by the year 2025, gives the highway's construction new urgency. "The Pan-American Highway is the only unfinished international highway even though it is the most important in the world...all of humanity is awaiting (its completion)," stated Colombia's Minister of Transportation under the Gaviria administration, Jorge Bedeck Olivella.

Plans to build the road are rapidly moving into gear. The Inter-American

Development Bank (IDB) is financing a \$1.5 million environmental impact statement for the construction of the Pan-American Highway's last segment, according to official documents from the Ministries of Foreign Relations in Panama and Colombia. This financing is significant as the IDB generally funds environmental assessments only if it intends to support the actual project. However, according to an IDB representative, the study is not an environmental impact statement, but rather a general environmental diagnosis of the region. IDB representatives have insisted that they would not finance such an environmentally and culturally destructive project. Yet, according to one well-known Panamanian newspaper, the IDB has offered to loan funds of \$29 million to finance the project. The World Bank is also funding an environmental impact

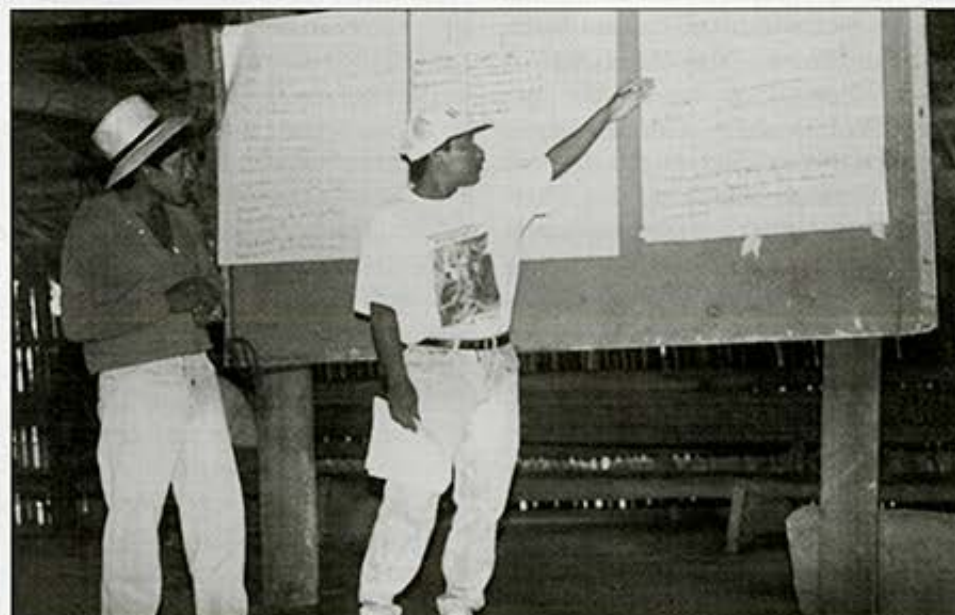


Photo: Alicia Korten

The Indigenous Panamerican Highway Commission holds meetings to organize communities throughout the Darien

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statement for the paving of the 100 mile road that already penetrates the Darien, stated Luis Castaneda, Director of Planning at the Ministry of Public Works in Panama. Panamanian officials state that these projects are part of a five-year nation-wide road-building program. Of the \$406 million budgeted for the program, the Inter-American Development Bank and the World Bank are providing \$220 million in loans. "No highway construction can take place in Panama in the next five years that does not follow IDB guidelines," stated one IDB official.

Opposition to extension of the highway is also gaining momentum. Diverse organizations ranging from the International Union for the Conservation of Nature to the Union of Panamanian Cattle Ranchers have written resolutions opposing the road's construction. These groups argue that the road would devastate the area's biological and cultural diversity and facilitate the spread of hoof-and-mouth disease into North America. Even in Colombia, the road's most aggressive supporter, the government-run Institute for Development and Natural Resources (INDARENA), recommended in December of 1994 halting the project due to its potential environmental impact. Archie Carr, an eminent biologist with the New York-based Wildlife Conservation Society, warned "the construction of a highway across the Darien Gap would constitute an ecological crisis... If Darien is a biological plug, a barrier to a biological upheaval that could affect both major continents in the region, then it achieves greater conservation significance than any other forest."

Indigenous peoples, whose homelands and cultural subsistence are at a stake, continue to be marginalized from all government discussions. "We have been fighting to gain a voice in the dialogue, but the government has blocked Indigenous participation," stated Edy Degaiza, the Embera-Wounaan General Congress's IPAHC delegate.

The government has responded to

pressure from the Indigenous organization with a few concessions. Government officials invited an Indigenous delegate to participate in the February 1994 meeting of the Good Neighbor Commission, a binational body negotiating all agreements between Panama and Colombia, but refused to finance the trip. "Without monies to cover expenses, we could not send our delegate," explained Cacique Leopoldo Baporiso, chief of the Embera-Wounaan in the Darien.

IPAHC delegates are now meeting

with Panamanian government officials and multilateral bank representatives to demand participation in all studies and development projects for their homelands. They are also reaching out to organizations nationally and internationally who have expressed concern regarding the highway plans. Leaders hope that through their continued efforts, and with the support of solidarity organizations, they will be able to influence the destiny of their peoples and the rainforests of the Darien Gap on which they depend.

**R**esolution of the Indigenous Embera, Wounaan and Kuna peoples of Panama at the second national meeting to discuss the construction of the Pan-American Highway on October 7-8 1994, in the Kuna community of Pindupe, Comarca Madungandi.

#### **We Resolve:**

- 1) To reject the construction of the Pan-American Highway, a railroad or any other project through our lands without our consent.
- 2) To demand the legalization and demarcation of the Madungandi, Ngobe-Bugle and Wargandi Comarcas and that collective land titles be provided to the Embera and Wounaan in order to protect the natural resources of our territories. We refuse to accept any project if these demands have not been met.
- 3) To broadcast nationally and internationally the existence of the Indigenous Pan-American Highway Commission...
- 4) To authorize the Commission, in consultation with the traditional authorities, to seek the funds necessary to achieve the Commission's objectives at a national and international level.
- 5) To demand that multilateral financial institutions and the national government give participation to the Commission in all plans to construct infrastructure through Indigenous territories and provide the Commission access to all the information necessary for our Congresses to decide whether the project is beneficial or not.
- 6) To reiterate our demand for participation within the Good Neighbor Commission composed of the governments of Panama and Colombia.
- 8) To solicit support for the Commission from Indigenous organizations outside of Panama, solidarity groups and non-governmental organizations.

*Written in the Madungandi Comarca, Community of PINDUP on October 7, 1994.*

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