

## International Opposition To Parana-Paraguay Hidrovia Mounts

*Indigenous people from Brazil, Paraguay, and Bolivia joined environmental groups and social organizations from eight countries in questioning plans for an industrial waterway on the Paraguay and Parana Rivers which, according to technical experts, could drain the world's largest wetland expanse, the Pantanal of Mato Grosso, Brazil. The meeting, called "Hidrovia Parana-Paraguay: Impacts and Alternatives" was held at the Latin American Parliament in Sao Paulo, from December 8-10.*

by Glenn Switkes

Organizations gathered in Sao Paulo warned that construction of the *Hidrovia* could eliminate the Pantanal's ability to hold water during the rainy season, cause disastrous flooding downstream, and threaten the survival of native peoples and other communities living along the river and its tributaries. Indigenous peoples are also concerned the project would harm populations of fish, birds, and wildlife, on which native communities depend for survival. They also foresee increased land conflicts resulting from speculative land buying, and a flow of migrants to the area in search of jobs.

Supporters of the project claim that opening the upper reaches of the Paraguay River to ocean-going vessels can serve as the "backbone" of South American economic integration within the new Southern Cone Common Market, Mercosur. Some have gone so far as to predict a series of waterways that will link the Paraguay with the Amazon and Orinoco.

Indigenous people taking part in the meeting sounded a warning based upon their experiences with other large-scale development projects. Vitor Aurape Bakairi cited impacts from Polonoroeste, a World Bank road building project, which he said "tore apart our communities. People lost their land and moved to the periphery of the cities. Many of our women became prostitutes. We don't want that to happen again."

*Glenn Switkes coordinates the International Rivers Network's Hidrovia campaign.*

Blas Federico Garcia, of the General Coordinating Body of the Pilcomayo Basin of Paraguay, said that the course of the Pilcomayo River was altered in a manner similar to that planned for the Paraguay. "We don't remember anymore how it was before, when the Pilcomayo was the source of our life. Rain doesn't come anymore. It's impossible to cultivate food. We had an enormous lake, Laguna Escalante Cuellar, where there was always fish." According to Federico Garcia, the river project closed off the river's tributaries, drying up the lake.

Valentin Muiba Guaji, the Secretary for Economy and Development of the Central of Indigenous Peoples of the Bolivian Oriente (CIDOB), expressed the native peoples' determination to be involved in the discussion and debate regarding the project. "Who are we? Are we like little animals within the forest? Most of our people live along the rivers. We thought development was participatory, equal. But, we see it is not. This development will serve the needs of how many?"

Marta Guarani, of the Kaguatca Association, and Marcos Terena, of the Alliance of Indigenous Peoples of the Southern Cone, declared their intention to disseminate information on potential impacts of the *Hidrovia* to native communities. Other representatives included Terena, Guarani, Bororo, Kaingang, and Pareci people from Mato Grosso and Mato Grosso do Sul, Brazil; as well as Ailton Krenak from the Indigenous Research Center. Additional populations identified

as endangered by the *Hidrovia* project include the Ayureo, Chamacoco, Toba-Maskoy, Angaité, Pai Tavytera, and the Guato, a population near extinction which lives within the limits of the Pantanal.

Three Indigenous delegates were chosen to participate in the coordinating body which will advance proposals for a broad campaign to raise awareness and development action plans regarding the Parana-Paraguay *Hidrovia*.

According to participants at the *Hidrovia* seminar, "Environmental impact studies must include the participation of all sectors of society...[the Banks] must consult with the public in a way which is open and truly participatory." The Inter-American Development Bank and United Nations Development Programme are coordinating economic and engineering feasibility studies, and an environmental impact assessment (EIA) for the *Hidrovia* project.

Conference delegates also pointed out that the Paraguayan government has already indicated it will request bids from engineering companies to explode rock outcroppings at the base of the Pantanal, which could have irreversible environmental impacts. NGO delegates at the Sao Paulo meeting warned: "If work begins on parts of the project before the Environmental Impact Assessment is completed...the EIA will have no value."

*For more information: International Rivers Network, 1847 Berkeley Way, Berkeley CA 94703. A report "Considering the Hidrovia" is available for \$12*



Indigenous leader Marta Vitor Guarani (right) addresses the meeting on *Hidrovia*

photo: Maria Helena Brancher