

Negotiations on a Naval Base in Kuna Territory: Panama

The proposed establishment of a naval military base in Indigenous territory, with the purpose of combating international drug traffic, has provoked a heated debate in Kuna and Panamanian public opinion since mid-1996. The original proposal was for construction of a base in Puerto Escoces, a site of historic importance to the Kuna, where they first opposed colonizing efforts by Scottish settlers, and where the United States had built a naval base during World War II, ostensibly in defense of

the canal. This base has long been abandoned, but the region has been of interest to archeologists interested in colonial history, and some speculators who have tried to follow up rumors of mineral resources.

Although the Panamanian government claims that Puerto Escoces is "uninhabited," the bay is owned and used by nearby Kunas, who cultivate their crops along the rivers, fish and hunt as well as gather wild provisions. The natural beauties of the area are described as a "paradise" of crystalline waters and verdant vegetation. In response to the proposal to take over this area, first presented in early 1996, local Kuna demanded an environmental impact study, negotiations with binding agreements, and payment for confiscated lands. These demands were met by blunt refusals from the government, who expressed indignation that Indigenous people would try to be involved in negotiations or indemnifications.

Since the first proposal, the Kuna, who have a long reputation as staunch defenders of their autonomy, their lands and of environmental preservation, have mobilized resistance. Despite numerous attempts to divide the communities and leaders, attempts which included threats, blackmail, and offers of special privileges to some leaders, the Kuna General Congress established a commission to study the issue. In June 1997, the Kuna General Congress decided unanimously to oppose the military base at Puerto Escoces, located deep in Kuna territory, suggesting instead the port of Obaldia on the border with Columbia. The border itself, they argue, is the place for such activities, and is already disturbed by the nearby warfare between Colombian forces and guerrilla groups, as well as narcotics traffickers. Puerto Obaldia is already a refuge for many impoverished Colombians fleeing from the violence in the region.

Various groups, ranging from the Catholic missionaries in Kuna Yala,

human rights groups and the Kuna Women's Federation, have spoken out in support of the General Congress decision.

Of special interest in this dispute is the role of the U.S. Ambassador in the debates concerning the base. The U.S. government had reportedly agreed to finance the building of the facility (many believe it was their idea, in light of the closing of U.S. bases around the canal), through Kuna authorities have never been told the exact arrangements or the dollar amount pledged. When the Kuna were having trouble getting Panama to negotiate, a group of Kuna leaders went directly to the Ambassador and presented their case. The Ambassador said that he didn't want to get involved in internal matters, but if the Kunas persisted in opposing the base, the U.S. would take their money elsewhere.

At this point the Panamanians stepped up their campaign of intimidation and subterfuge, even producing a phony "Accord" which they claimed had already been signed by local community leaders. Those who opposed the base were publicly branded "narcotraficantes and their allies." In the words of Kuna spokesperson, Atencio Lopez, "there has been a resurgence of standard myths about 'national security,' of 'economic development of the Indigenous people through military industry,' of 'the laziness of the Indigenous people as synonymous with Third World underdevelopment,' and other barbarities." As Lopez says, the disputed land is Kuna land, "so we must be the ones who preserve nature in the place that has been converted to another 'blood-stained land' (from which comes the name ABYA YALA, or blood-stained continent.) The agitation and debate on this issue have "placed in danger the political, administrative and territorial autonomy of the Comarca Kuna Yala, the most ancient and distinguished Indigenous autonomy in the New World. With this move the Kuna have demonstrated once again their political capability, because in spite of everything they have brought a halt to a project of great scope promoted by the governments of Panama and the United States, of which we can only with difficulty predict the benefits or problems for the Kunas' future." 🐦

(This article has been revised, edited and altered from the original by Atencio Lopez, a Kuna lawyer and President of the Kuna organization, Napguana.)

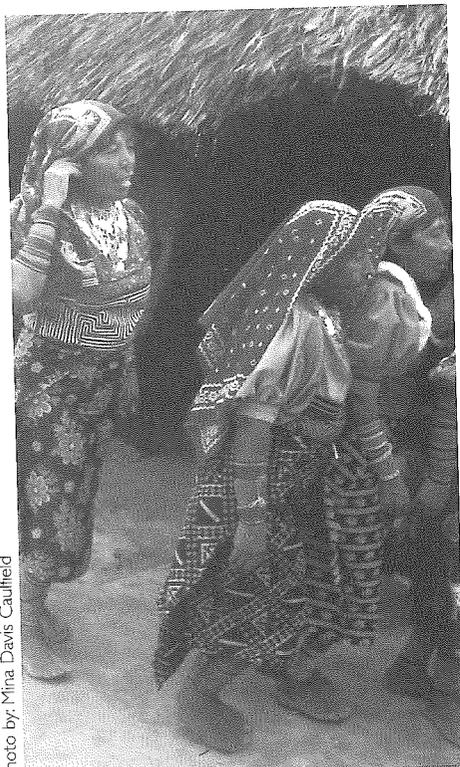


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