

# Closing the Darien Gap?

## The Pan-American Highway's last Link

by Alicia Korten



Delegates from throughout the Embera-Wounan territory travelled by river to a meeting regarding construction of the Pan-American highway

"We do not want the Pan-American Highway built through our homelands", states Leopoldo Baporiso, chief of the 13,400 Embera-Wounaan peoples of Panama's easternmost province, the Darien. He states that the highways will cause, "massive deforestation, immigration by outsiders, an increase in drug traffickers, violence and the loss of our culture". In October of 1993, the Panamanian and Colombian governments signed agreements to begin studies that they hope will lead to the connection of North and South America through the Darien Gap. If this 107 kilometer stretch is built, the highway will run without a break between Alaska and Argentina's southern tip.

The Darien Gap is one of the world's most biologically rich rainforests and a critical corridor between North and South American ecosystems for plant and wildlife. The area is home to roughly 40,000 inhabitants, including

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five distinct Indigenous nations, African-Americans, and mestizo colonists. UNESCO declared the Darien National Park, the largest in Central America, a World Heritage Site and Biosphere Reserve in 1981 and 1983 respectively because of its cultural and biological diversity.

The Colombian and Panamanian governments are exploring three different routes—one along the Pacific Coast, one along the Atlantic Coast, and one through the isthmus's middle which would pass through the border community Palo de Letras. The Palo de Letras route is the shortest, least costly and most favored. All routes pass through Embera, Wounaan and Kuna territories. The Palo de Letras route cuts through the Indigenous communities Pucuro, Paya, Cupé, Aruza and others as well as through the Darien National Park and the Katios Park in Colombia—both of which have regulations permitting the highway's construction.

Pressure to build the road comes primarily from South American governments and industries who want greater access to North American markets. Colombia, Mexico and Venezuela

are promoting the highway's construction most aggressively due to a recently signed free trade agreement. "The highway ... will facilitate trade of petroleum, cotton, cloth, iron, steel, and other goods between Mexico, Colombia and Venezuela," states Juan Castanega, Colombia's Director of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Latin American Desk.

Extending the Pan-American highway is part of the Colombian government's aggressive development package for the region. The Pacific Plan is a complementary mega-project aimed at opening the region to multiple forms of resource exploitation (see *Abya Yala*, V. 7:3&4). The plan has gone through many revisions since its initial draft in 1983, which stated that "this extensive region contains immense forest, fishing, river-and sea-based mineral resources which the country requires immediately." The 1992 proposal however, begins with discussion of sustainable development and poverty alleviation and then continues with the previous goals of oil exploration, mining, large scale agriculture, commercial fishing and tourism. Together, these projects threaten the region with mas

sive change--change which local peoples feel will displace their communities and devastate the region's environment.

Indigenous peoples fear the highway would erode the forests on which their way of life depends by facilitating the area's colonization and development. In December of 1993, over 500 delegates from different Embera-Wounaan communities passed a resolution stating their "rejection of the Pan-American Highway's construction through Indigenous territories in Panama" because, "the construction of the Pan-American highway through our territories would cause irreparable damage to our forests, rivers, flora and farms upon which depend our brothers and sisters the animals and our river culture. The wounds caused by the recent construction of the Pan-American highway to Yavisa are still fresh. This construction caused the conversion of our territories into cow pastures and little by little the extinction of the biodiversity of our lands." Six indigenous organizations in the Darien Gap have formed a coalition called the Indigenous Pan-American Highway Commission (IPAHC) to gain a voice in upcoming negotiations. "We are demanding our legal rights to consultation regarding any plans the government has for our ancestral lands", states Clasmere Carpio, IPAHC's Coordinator.

Funding for the 107 kilometer link is not yet secured. However, the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) will loan Panama money to elaborate initial technical studies and environmental impact statements. The IDB will also provide Colombia \$1.5 million to renovate the Pan-American Highway segment Medellin-Turbo, an existing road that requires paving to support inter-continental traffic. The United States government will likely not provide funding but may support the project by providing technical assistance, according to State Department officials. Indigenous peoples are discouraging any outside funders from supporting the project. ♡



**Resolution of the Indigenous Embera Wounaan and Kuna peoples of Panama at a national encounter to discuss extension of the Pan-American highway on May 8, 1994, in the community of Comun, Comarca Embera-Wounaan, Area of Cemaco.**

Before the imminent threat against Indigenous culture, our congresses can not remain silent. We therefore resolve the following:

- First: Reject the Projects that the Panamanian and Colombian Governments are discussing within the Good Neighbor Commission to Open the Darien Gap by building the Pan-American Highway.
- Second: Demand the immediate suspension of studies being undertaken and that will be undertaken by the Panamanian and Colombian governments, to open the Darien Gap, which constitutes our Territories.
- Third: In the case that they continue to meet to discuss the opening of the Darien Gap, we demand the participation of Indigenous Nations under equal conditions, to realize studies and Development Plans at a National and International level, that may affect our territories.
- Fourth: Expand urgently the Indigenous Pan-American Highway Commission (Darien Gap), to include the following: a. A member and assistant of the General Congresses of the Embera-Wounaan and Kuna b. A member and assistant of Pucuro-Paya and the Oitcewd.
- Fifth: Demand that the Multilateral Financing Agencies such as the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), the World Bank and others, suspend all credit for Studies and Projects in relation to the Opening of the Darien Gap and the participation of the Indigenous Nations in all Plans and Development Projects that will affect our territories.
- Sixth: Request the International Community and Solidarity Groups to demand that Financing Agencies and the Panamanian and Colombian Governments give real participation to the Indigenous Nations regarding plans for the region.

Cacique Leonidas Valdez. Kuna General Congress.  
 Cacique Leopoldo Baporiso. Embera-Wounaan General Congress.  
 Cacique Benjamin Garcia. Madugandi General Congress.  
 Cacique Gilberto Ayala. Cacique of Paya.

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