

Bolivians demand controversial highway be built

January 31 2012



Thousands of Bolivia's indigenous peasants from the Isiboro Secure National Park's Indigenous Territory (TIPNIS) arrive in La Paz after a 40-day march. More than 2,000 Amazon Indians on Monday called on Bolivian President Evo Morales to approve the building of a highway through a nature reserve, a project scrapped last year after widespread protests.

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Demonstrators rallied in the capital La Paz, some of them after a protest march of 400 kilometers (240 miles) which was backed by Morales. They planned to stage a sit-in in the city center, organizers said.

"The road means development for San Ignacio de Moxos, where we live

in isolation, and development for Bolivia," David Ibanez -- who walked with his wife and young son -- told AFP.

Morales said in October he was scrapping the hugely controversial plan to build the highway, which was to be part of a network linking landlocked Bolivia to both the Pacific through Chile and the Atlantic through Brazil.

The move came after 2,000 [indigenous people](#) walked for two months from their homeland in the Amazon lowlands to La Paz to press him to cancel the project through the Isiboro Secure National Park and Indigenous Territory (TIPNIS).

Planners had wanted the Brazil-financed road to run through the TIPNIS, leveling an [ancestral homeland](#) inhabited by 50,000 native people from three different native groups.

Amazon natives feared that landless Andean Quechua and Aymara people -- Bolivia's main [indigenous groups](#) and Morales supporters -- would flood into the road area and colonize their land.

Morales, the country's first elected indigenous president, had however said the 300-kilometer (186 mile) highway was vital for economic development.

His right-wing opposition has charged that the march in support of the project was orchestrated by supporters of Morales, particularly by unions of the Chapare coca growers, who have an economic interest in the highway's route.

Some demonstrators said they planned to rest after the long march.

"The altitude has affected us a little," said Hilario Malure. "We are tired,

we came on foot."

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