

Bolivia consults locals on jungle highway project

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An Amazonic indigenous native woman carries a parrot on her shoulder inside a university gymnasium used as a temporary accomodation by a group of some 1,000 natives who walked during two months from Trinidad to La Paz to protest a highway through their ancestral homeland.

The Bolivian government of President Evo Morales Sunday met with indigenous Amazon basin lowland residents to discuss plans for a controversial highway that would run through their their homeland.

Angry protests last year by indigenous residents of the Isiboro Secure National Park and Indigenous Territory (called TIPNIS), and the government's clumsy efforts to put down protests, seriously eroded national support for the leftist Morales administration.

The event kicked off in the town of San Miguelito, in the TIPNIS, with

the presence of Public Works Minister Vladimir Sanchez. Observers with the Organization of American States and the Union of South American were also present.

The meetings are aimed at asking the 33,000 mostly [indigenous people](#) residents if they want a [highway](#) that would cut through their reserve -- until now fairly remote and rich in animal and plant life -- and if so on what terms.

Talks will last for a month and the results will be known in two months, officials said.

Morales' government is keen to carry out the highway project, which is funded to the tune of 332 million dollars by Brazil. It is part of a network of highways linking landlocked Bolivia to both the Pacific through Chile and the Atlantic through Brazil, key outlets for Bolivian exports.

The government earlier said it would be too expensive to build the highway around the reserve.

Morales, 52, the country's first indigenous president, has come under tremendous popular pressure to end the project.

The government put the project on hold after two months of violent demonstrations, and protest marches by the Amazon natives from the jungle to the capital La Paz, in the Andean highlands.

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

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