

SNAPSHOT

Bolivia's marchers

A colourful stream of some 1,000 environmentalists and traditionally dressed indigenous Bolivians from the Amazon region traipsed across their country to protest 16 indigenous causes — the first of which was the building of a new road. The marchers set off in August from Trinidad, capital of the lowland province of Beni, and walked 310 miles from the humid tropics to the cloud forests of the Yungas, and through countless other dramatic landscapes, to reach the craggy Andes. This photograph shows them arriving at their destination, the high-altitude seat of government at La Paz, on 19 October 2011, in a crowd that had swelled to several thousand.

The road project in question would run for 185 miles through Isiboro Sécuré

Indigenous Territory and National Park. It would connect Brazil, whose biggest export partner is China, with Pacific ports in Peru and Chile. But it would also attract settlers and new industries to an area where 15,000 indigenous people still live largely traditional lifestyles.

The government of Bolivia's first indigenous president, Evo Morales, pushed ahead with plans to build the road without first consulting indigenous communities. That went against Bolivia's 2009 constitution, which Morales himself introduced, and led to several principled resignations in the government, including that of Pablo Solón Romero, Bolivia's former ambassador to the United Nations and chief climate change negotiator. Solón wrote an open letter to the president in September, lambasting Morales's inconsistent stance

on the environmental protection of 'Mother Earth'.

The marchers' list of 16 grievances also contained demands relating to how the payments from Bolivia's Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD) schemes are distributed. REDD schemes were introduced under the previous government and have received a fair amount of negative publicity in Bolivia, says Nick Buxton, who worked with Solón to organize a large climate change conference in Cochabamba last year. A 2009 Greenpeace report entitled *Carbon Scam* heavily criticized schemes in the Noel Kempff area, claiming that they simply pushed the drivers of deforestation elsewhere, did little to offset carbon emissions and failed to provide local communities with an alternative livelihood. Many Bolivians — still scarred from the past decade's violent social conflicts over the privatization of water provision — are deeply sceptical of policies that commodify natural resources such as carbon.

"The march became the flashpoint for contradictions in policies related to development and environmental justice," explains Buxton. "Some of the indigenous are very much opposed to REDD, whereas others want to get the benefits from it. It's the same within the government."

The road project has now been cancelled. Morales finally bowed to growing political pressure in late September, shortly after his defence and interior ministers were forced to quit because 500 police had fired tear gas and wielded clubs at the marchers, and then detained hundreds of them. (They were released shortly afterwards.) Some of the marchers forced foreign minister David Choquehuanca to walk alongside them for a few hours by holding on to his arms. They claimed it was for their own protection, as they moved through an area with strong political support for Morales. On 11 October 2011, Bolivia's lower house of Congress finally backed Morales's decision to halt the road's construction, which was made law on 25 October 2011.



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