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20-10-2011 - TIPNIS march in La Paz – still no dialogue with Bolivian government.

20 October 2011

Dario Kenner, La Paz

Daily updates on TIPNIS conflict at Twitter: @dariokenner

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I left the Plaza Murillo (main square in La Paz) at 11.30pm where the situation had finally calmed down after hours of tension and some clashes. There is still no dialogue between the Bolivian government led by President Evo Morales and the indigenous marchers who oppose the building of a road through the indigenous territory and national park called TIPNIS.

When indigenous movements CIDOB and CONAMAQ got to La Paz after a 500+ kilometre trek that took two months the plan was to begin dialogue with President Morales to resolve the TIPNIS conflict that has polarised Bolivia. The arrival of the march yesterday was spectacular as tens of thousands of people welcomed them to the city. But then things started to go wrong.

Attempts to start dialogue.

Since the TIPNIS march arrived the Bolivian government has made a series of mistakes which have damaged its popularity and provoked the marchers. President Morales offended the march by not making an appearance yesterday. It is still not clear why but it did not contribute to an atmosphere of trust and respect.

Yesterday evening around a hundred marchers decided to hold a vigil in the Plaza Murillo until the

government began dialogue. The government ordered the police not to let more marchers into the square. What really angered people was that the police for a while did not let residents of La Paz pass food and blankets to those inside the square.

Then this morning the game of cat and mouse began about where dialogue would begin between the indigenous march and the President. The TIPNIS march was convinced the meeting would happen in the Presidential Palace and say this is what Morales promised. The government gave what can only be described as a very strange excuse for why this was not possible. It turns out the Presidential Palace is being renovated. The leaders of the TIPNIS march said this was a ridiculous reason not to meet in the Palace and that they had slept in much worse conditions on their two month march. President Morales waited in the building of the Vice Presidency two blocks away at 10.30am but the marchers did not go as they said dialogue must be in the Palace.

While it looks like there is no difference between meeting in the Presidential Palace or the Vice Presidency actually there is. The indigenous marchers inside Plaza Murillo did not want to leave because they predicted the police would not let them back in. This was true as the police surrounded the square and did not let more marchers in (more on this below). For the marchers it is important to be in Plaza Murillo as a way to pressure the Morales government. Indeed Morales has used these exact same tactics in the past so he knows how important constant mobilisation and pressure is. The other reason is that the Presidential Palace and Plaza Murillo are the symbolic centres of political power in Bolivia. The marchers did not go all the way from the Amazon to the highlands to then be told they would meet somewhere else.

Inside the Plaza Murillo

I got in around 5.30pm after convincing the police to let me pass. In front of the entrance of the Presidential palace there was a line of around 50 marchers waiting to get in. The government had invited 20 representatives of the march to dialogue at 6pm. After waiting around an hour and a half the commission of 50 marchers gave up. The government was firm the invitation was for 20 marchers and there was not space for the entire commission.

Then at 8pm in the entrance to the Presidential Palace we were given copies of a letter sent from Minister of the Presidency Carlos Romero to the leadership of the TIPNIS march. The letter said the government would guarantee the entrance of 20 representatives and other members of the TIPNIS march who were outside the Plaza Murillo (the letter does not state a maximum number) to enter the Presidential Palace at 9pm.

Around half an hour later Fernando Vargas, President of the TIPNIS Subcentral (groups together the majority of the indigenous communities inside the TIPNIS) gave the official response. Vargas said the condition to begin dialogue was to let the hundreds of TIPNIS marchers blocked by police outside the square to join them by 8am tomorrow morning. He also called on all Bolivians, especially from El Alto and La Paz, to come to Plaza Murillo to pressure the government to enter into dialogue and prevent a road going through the TIPNIS

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Commission of indigneous march metres away from entrance to Presidential Palace (credit: Dario Kenner)
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Fernando Vargas, President of TIPNIS Subcentral, gives press conference (credit: Dario Kenner)
Just after 9pm President Morales held a press conference where he commented he felt the marchers did not want to dialogue because he waited twice for them but they didn't turn up. Morales said the marchers needed to sort out their internal issues such as ever changing demands to allow up to 100 marchers into the Presidential Palace or for huge screens to be setup in the square to show any meetings live. The indigenous leaders watching the press conference on the screen in a TV van were not impressed.

Then it looked like nothing else was going to happen and the indigenous marchers were getting ready to sleep in the freezing cold. Suddenly riot police were running to the corner of the square where the Presidential Palace is. The TIPNIS marchers and people from La Paz blocked by the police were trying to get

in to the square

As we heard the shouts and saw the teargas the marchers inside the Plaza Murillo rushed to the corner to try and facilitate the entrance of those outside. The police moved quickly to stop this happening and there were scuffles and pepper spray. Later an eyewitness with those outside told me it has been young people who had provoked the police and that the TIPNIS marchers tried to stop them. It is still not completely clear what happened but the police used teargas and there are three reported injured (two police, one marcher).

The TIPNIS marchers inside the square swamped a riot van that tried to go down to where the people outside the square were trying to force their way in. The van was forced to turn around as people shouted "no more repression". Things calmed down after that but you could feel the tension and anger of the marchers who have already suffered police violence on the 25 September

Riot police positioned themselves in the corner of the square and soon the situation calmed down. The indigenous marchers went back to the centre of Plaza Murillo. I was next to Adolfo Chávez, President of the CIDOB, while he debated on live TV with Interior Minister Wilfredo Chávez. Adolfo Chávez was visibly angry while he asked the Interior Minister to answer "just be sincere with the Bolivian people, will the road go through the TIPNIS or not?". He tried to stay calm while Wilfredo Chávez repeatedly said on live TV that the marchers did not want dialogue just after the clashes with the police. In the end they both agreed dialogue was the way forward.

Tomorrow will be a crucial day. Hopefully the dialogue will start. Could all of this had been more straight forward if the Bolivian government had show clear political will to start a dialogue instead of repeatedly provoking the TIPNIS march? While it is understandable the government wants to hold a meeting in private (and not live on big screens in Plaza Murillo) the argument there was not enough space inside the Presidential Palace is weak. In addition the clashes between police and those trying to get into the square were unnecessary. The hundreds of TIPNIS marchers inside the square are peaceful so would it really make that much difference to allow in more marchers? Tomorrow there will potentially be mobilisations in support of the TIPNIS marchers. Depending on how big they are the Bolivian government might be forced to lift the police block of the Plaza Murillo. It is true the leadership of the TIPNIS march also needs to be open to dialogue but the provocations yesterday and today (along with the constant accusations during the entire time of the march since 15 August) only entrench their positions even more. In this delicate political situation the Morales government cannot afford many more mistakes.

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