

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

PUBLIC STATEMENT

AI Index: AMR 18/002/2011
27 September 2011

Bolivia: use of excessive force must be investigated

Amnesty International calls on the Bolivian authorities to carry out an immediate investigation into allegations of the use of excessive force against indigenous protestors during a raid on 25 September by riot police on a makeshift camp near Yucumo, 320 km north-east of the capital La Paz.

More than 1,000 indigenous activists had been marching peacefully since 15 August from the town of Trinidad towards La Paz to protest against the planned construction of a motorway between Cochabamba and Trinidad. As the current proposal stands, the motorway will cut through the Isiboro-Sécure Indigenous Territory National Park (TIPNIS).

The Indigenous march was obstructed near Yucumo where supporters of the government motorway construction plans blocked their path. Police placed themselves between the two groups to prevent any clashes.

According to reports, on 25 September dozens of riot police used tear gas and truncheons during a raid on the makeshift camp where the indigenous protesters were based. This came a day after Foreign Minister, David Choquehuanca, had been briefly forced to march with protestors in a bid, they said, to advance the march through the police line between the two groups.

When the police arrived at the camp, many fled, and in the confusion some mothers were separated from their children. One child is reported to have died during the operation and a number of people sustained injuries. Video footage of the operation showed the police detaining some activists and placing tape over their mouths.

According to reports, medical staff were blocked from attending the injured and a doctor was detained. He was reportedly beaten at the time of arrest and was treated at the hospital alongside 45 other people reportedly injured during the police operation but was later released.

Any allegations of excessive use of force by police should be immediately and impartially investigated and those responsible brought to justice.

Local police officials have said that the operation to clear the camp was in response to threats they received from a group of indigenous people armed with bows and arrows.

As Indigenous organizations have vowed to restart the march, the police have a duty to maintain public order but they should always discharge that responsibility in accordance with international human rights standards on the use of force and without committing abuses.

The police should only use force where strictly necessary and even then the minimum possible amount required by the circumstances, so that the risk of inflicting harm and injuries is reduced to a minimum.

Bolivia's President Evo Morales, has publicly declared his strong support for the construction of the motorway but on 26 September announced the temporary suspension of the section of

the road that would pass through the Isiboro-Sécure Indigenous Territory National Park. He also announced that a regional referendum would be held to decide if the construction of the road would go ahead. The Minister of Defence has resigned over the incident.

Indigenous Peoples living in the path of the proposed road say they were not consulted about the plans as required by the Constitution and do not consent to its construction along the proposed route.