

Bolivian president Evo Morales scraps plans for Amazon highway

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Morales bows to protesters who campaigned against construction of 185-mile road through indigenous park land

Bolivia's under-fire president, [Evo Morales](#), has announced he will scrap plans to plough a controversial highway through an indigenous and ecological reserve in the Amazon.

Two days after several thousand protestors converged on La Paz, to oppose the construction of a 185-mile road through the Isiboro Secure National Park and Indigenous Territory (Tipnis), Morales met with indigenous campaigners who had been marching on Bolivia's main city since August.

Speaking at a press conference before the meeting, Morales announced the Tipnis would be spared. "The Tipnis issue is resolved," he said. "This is governing by obeying the people."

Morales said he would push measures through Congress to prevent the road passing through the bio-diverse region in Bolivia's portion of the Amazon. The park would be declared an "untouchable zone", he said.

Morales, Bolivia's first indigenous president, won a landslide re-election in December 2009 but recent months have seen his popularity ratings slide, largely because of plans for the road that was intended to improve trade links between neighbouring Brazil and the Pacific ports.

Friday's U-turn represented a dramatic change-of-heart from a president who as recently as June had declared: "Whether they like it or not, we will build that road."

Jorge Lazarte, a political analyst from La Paz's Universidad Catolica, said Morales's retreat was the result of "enormous pressure from the indigenous protesters".

"He had to yield to this pressure. The president's announcement is what he should have done long ago, when the march began two months ago," he said.

"This is a defeat for the president," Lazarte added, claiming Morales had "shown great weakness" in his handling of the situation.

Outcry over the planned highway began growing in mid August, when a group of more than 1,000 indigenous protesters began marching from Trinidad in eastern [Bolivia](#) to La Paz, to draw attention to the road, which they feared could lead to an influx of illegal loggers, oil and gas companies and coca growers, spelling

disaster for the region. In September dozens of protesters were injured after police attempted to break-up the march using teargas and batons.

On Wednesday, when the exhausted marchers finally arrived in La Paz, they were joined by tens of thousands of locals on the streets. Protesters flocked to Plaza Murillo, outside the presidential palace, waving flags and demanding to be received by Morales.

"We are trying to show them that they have our support," said Gabriela Villaroel, a local resident who was carrying a sign reading: 'La Paz welcomes you.'

"We are against the building of this highway, just like them, because this is a protected area that we should defend, not only for our country but also for the world."

So far the protests in La Paz have been relatively peaceful but on Thursday night riot police fired teargas at a group of people who were trying to get into the square. Two police officers were injured.

The British Foreign Office updated its travel advice for the city, warning travellers: "You should avoid all demonstrations of any kind."

The protest's leaders reacted cautiously to Morales's announcement and said stopping the road's construction was just one of 16 vindications involving environmental and social issues. Further talks were planned for Friday evening.

"What we are seeing is that he's showing political will. But until we sit down to dialogue, this is just a political proposal," said Fernando Vargas, one of the protest's leaders.