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ANDESTO THE AMAZON BY DAVID HILL

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Peru funded illegal Amazon rainforest road, claims Global Witness

Report reveals work on road in remote Peruvian rainforest is underway, and alleges corruption and government involvement



The illegal road running towards the Purus National Park which could connect the remote Purus region to the rest of Peru. Photograph: Courtesy of RCP/SERNANP

The local government in one of the remotest parts of the Peruvian Amazon has allegedly funded the illegal clearing of rainforest at the start of the proposed route for a controversial highway that would run through the country's biggest national park.

According to a report by Global Witness, released in Lima last week, the highway would

stretch for 270km and connect the remote Purus region in south-east Peru to the rest of the country, ending at a town called Iñapari on the Brazilian border where it would link up with the existing Inter-Oceanica Highway. It would pass through a conservation concession, a communal indigenous reserve, the Alto Purus National Park, a reserve for indigenous peoples in "voluntary isolation" and one indigenous community.

Opponents fear the highway will destroy one of the most biodiverse regions in the world, increase the illegal mahogany trade, narco-trafficking and gold-mining, and decimate the "isolated" indigenous peoples if contact is made with them.

Supporters of the road say it will reduce the cost of living in a region otherwise inaccessible from the rest of Peru except by plane from a town called Pucallpa, increase trade and standards of living, and make it easier to transport people out of the region in medical emergencies.

According to the report, titled "Rocky Road: How Legal Failings and Vested Interests behind Peru's Purus highway threaten the Amazon and its People", the start of the proposed route leading from Purus's biggest town, Puerto Esperanza, has already been cleared. It extends for 15-20km, says Global Witness, and is known in Peru as a "trocha":

Former local government workers told Global Witness that the Purus municipality gave 10,000 Soles (almost US\$4,000) to a pro-highway group to pay for this illegal road clearing in 2012. The road clearing does not have the necessary authorisation as the parliamentary bill has not yet been passed.

Global Witness claims the pro-highway group is led by a Catholic priest, Miguel Piovesan.

"Piovesan showed me the illegal "trocha" himself," says Global Witness's Billy Kyte, "Rocky Road's" author and in Peru for its launch. "He's proud of it."



Priest Miguel

Piovesan on the illegal road that could link the remote Purus region to the rest of Peru.
Photograph: Courtesy of Global Witness

According to a complaint by the Environment Ministry to a public prosecutor's office in Pucallpa, the "trocha" had reached as far as the conservation concession and the buffer zone of the Purus Communal Reserve (PCR) by last September. Rafael Pino, the PCR's director, says that no progress has been made since then, but there are plans for 20 people to extend the "trocha" next month in the direction of the PCR, the national park and the "isolated" peoples' reserve.

"There's a latent danger that it will enter protected natural areas without any kind of prior authorization," Pino says.

A bill proposing that "terrestrial connection" between Purus and the rest of Peru by a highway – or even a railway – should be declared in the "public necessity and national interest" was submitted to Congress in April 2012, and approved by Congress's Commission for Transport and Communications in June.

The bill's biggest supporter is widely believed to be Congressman Carlos Tubino, who calls it "my bill." However, at a press conference launching "Rocky Road" last week, Tubino's chief adviser, Juan Carlos Torres Figari, claimed there was now "no risk of any highway."

At the end of the conference another of Tubino's team handed out two statements, one of which was titled, "Know the truth about Congressman Carlos Tubino's Bill 1035" and read:

It does not suggest building any highway running for 270km from Puerto Esperanza to Iñapari. The bill that Congress's Commission for Andean and

Amazonian Peoples will vote on has been modified and the phrase "terrestrial connection" has been deleted.

Tubino has followed that with a series of tweets calling the highway a "phantom", accusing Kyte of "lying", and saying that his bill now makes no mention of a "highway" – only "connection."

When I asked what this would consist of, Tubino said:

Currently the flights from Pucallpa to Puerto Esperanza are very long, dangerous, make essential goods excessively expensive, and are exploited by a monopoly. If the state considers it appropriate, it could build an airport at Iñapari and establish an aerial route to Puerto Esperanza. There's no doubt this would have a positive impact: it would be a much shorter route and would substantially reduce the price of essential goods. All this would benefit the people who live in Purus, the majority of whom are poor.

But Kyte dismisses Tubino's backtrack on the highway as "absurd", arguing that the bill has already been approved by the Transport Commission and therefore can be scheduled for debate in Congress. He says:

The risk of a highway being built is as strong as ever. The original ruling by the Transport Commission supporting it is still active and will be discussed in Congress no matter the decision by the Peoples Commission. Congressman Tubino is well aware of the implications of this ruling, and his efforts to deflect attention from it are extremely concerning and put Purus' indigenous people and forests at risk.

According to the Peoples Commission and the Transport Commission, both their rulings can go before Congress. However, Tubino says he can guarantee that only the Peoples' Commission's ruling will be debated and that it is the only one he is now backing.

"Rocky Road" makes a series of other claims including one that the local government stands accused of faking indigenous backing for the highway and another that an official tried to bribe one of Purus's indigenous organizations, FECONAPU, with around US\$10,000 to support it.

The report also highlights "possible conflicts of interests" of the highway's main supporters, including Tubino, saying it "would ease access to illegal timber" and that he was once "Political Military Head of Ucayali" – the department in which Purus is situated – when the Armed Forces were accused of profiting from the illegal timber trade in that region.

Tubino told me he "categorically denies the accusation" and will take legal action against Global Witness for starting a "smear campaign" against him.

"I will file a criminal complaint for defamation in Peru," he says, "and will make an appeal to the appropriate international courts."

Miguel Piovesan and the Purus government could not be reached for comment.

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