

28 September 2011 Last updated at 22:59 GMT

Bolivia highway protests spread, paralysing La Paz



Demonstrators expressed their anger at President Evo Morales for backing the road

Tens of thousands of demonstrators in Bolivia have brought traffic to a standstill in central La Paz.

They were protesting against the construction of a highway which would pass through a nature reserve in the Amazon.

The Bolivian government says the road is essential for development and would encourage trade by linking remote communities to market towns.

But indigenous communities fear it could encourage illegal settlements.

Bolivia's largest labour union had called for a day of protest on Wednesday.

Public anger

Thousands blocked the streets of central La Paz, carrying banners opposing the road and criticising President Evo Morales.

One of the demonstrators told the Associated Press news agency that Evo Morales' government was "the worst and it should go because it attacked human beings, the indigenous compatriots who had given it their support, and now it's turned its back on them".

Many of the protesters called into question President Morales' commitment to indigenous rights and the protection of "Mother Earth", which he advocated during his election campaign.

President Morales has suspended work on the road until a referendum is held, but the furore over the construction and the government's handling of the protests has not abated.

Indigenous groups opposed to the road said on Wednesday they would resume their 500km (310-mile) march to La Paz.

Their trek was broken up by police firing tear gas on Sunday and protesters complained that

"extreme violence" had been used.

Defence Minister Cecilia Chacon resigned in protest at the police action.

Interior Minister Sacha Llorenti and his deputy Marcos Farfan stepped down on Tuesday.

They had defended the break-up of the march, but denied ordering the use of force.

28 September 2011 Last updated at 02:02 GMT

Bolivia minister resigns over Amazon road protest



Interior Minister Sacha Llorenti denied ordering police to use force against marchers

Bolivian Interior Minister Sacha Llorenti has resigned after being heavily criticised over a police crackdown on a protest march.

On Sunday police fired tear gas and arrested hundreds of activists protesting against the building of a road through the Amazon.

Mr Llorenti's deputy also quit and the defence minister resigned on Monday.

Bolivian President Evo Morales has suspended work on the road until a referendum is held.

However, a national furore over the construction has continued.

The proposed 300km (190-mile) road, financed by Brazil, would link Brazil to Pacific ports in Chile and Peru.

But it will also pass through an Amazon nature reserve that is home to about 50,000 people from three different indigenous groups.

About 1,000 protesters were staging a 500km (310-mile) march to the main city La Paz when riot police stopped them in the Yucumo region on Sunday.

Protesters complain that "extreme violence" was used when police surged into the demonstrators' camp.

Defence Minister Cecilia Chacon resigned immediately after Sunday's crackdown.

Debate call

Mr Llorenti initially defended the police action, saying it was aimed at preventing clashes with pro-government groups.

He announced his resignation on Tuesday, but said neither he nor President Morales had ordered the police to use force against the marchers.

"I gave the president my resignation and he has accepted it," he told reporters at the presidential palace.

His deputy minister, Marcos Farfan, also resigned but denied ordering the police action.

The director of Bolivia's migration agency, Maria Rene Quiroga, also stepped down on Tuesday in protest at the treatment of the protesters.

President Morales has suspended work on the road, calling for a debate between the two provinces involved - Cochabamba and Beni.

Correspondents say the controversy is a major setback for President Morales, who has been seen as a champion of indigenous communities in Bolivia.

Mr Morales says the road is essential for Bolivia's development.

26 September 2011 Last updated at 15:24 GMT

Bolivia minister quits in growing row over road protest



Witnesses said about 500 police surrounded the protesters

Bolivian Defence Minister Cecilia Chacon has resigned in protest at the government's decision to deploy police to break up an anti-road march.

Her resignation came amid growing public anger at the police action which saw some 500 officers fire tear gas and round up indigenous demonstrators.

The protesters had been marching since mid-August against plans to build a road through a rainforest reserve.

President Evo Morales says the road is essential for Bolivia's development.

However, on Sunday he offered to put the issue to a regional referendum.



Demonstrators blocked a landing strip on Monday to prevent police flying detainees out. Hours later, police wielding batons moved to clear the demonstrators from their camp outside the town of Yucomo, where they were stopped last week.

Protest leaders said dozens of people had been put on buses and driven away.

Local police chief Oscar Munoz said they were being taken back to their hometowns.

The Bolivian ombudsman, Rolando Villena, criticised what he said was excessive use of force by the police.

"Injured children, disappeared mothers who didn't want to separate from their children - this does not talk well about our democracy. This is not democracy," he said.

And on Monday, trade unions, indigenous associations and opposition parties all condemned the police action.

In a letter to President Morales, Ms Chacon gave notice of her "irrevocable" resignation.

"I do not agree with the decision to intervene in the march and I cannot defend or justify the measure when other alternatives existed," her letter said.

Deforestation

Also on Monday, people seized the landing strip in the Amazon town of Rurrenabaque to prevent police from flying detained protesters out of the area.

Hundreds of people set off last month from Trinidad to walk 500km (310 miles) to Bolivia's main city, La Paz, but were stopped at Yucomo, with about half the journey covered.

On Saturday, they briefly detained the foreign minister, David Choquehuanca, forcing him to walk with them.

Mr Choquehuanca, who had come to negotiate with the protesters, said the fact that he was freed showed "they want to resolve matters through dialogue".



The road is already under construction

Plans for a road through the Isiboro-Secure Indigenous Territory and National Park - known by its Spanish acronym Tipnis - have divided opinion in Bolivia.

Indigenous people who live in the reserve say the highway would encourage illegal settlement and deforestation in their ancestral Amazon homeland.

But others, including Mr Morales, say the road would help bring basic services to isolated communities, and also boost the local economy by giving farmers better access to markets.

The road, which would link the highland city of Cochabamba with San Ignacio de Moxos in the Amazon lowlands, is being funded by Brazil and built by a Brazilian company.

The march is the latest in a series of challenges Mr Morales is facing from the indigenous groups and social movements that helped make him Bolivia's first indigenous president.

24 September 2011 Last updated at 19:30 GMT

Bolivia Amazon road protesters break police blockade



Some of the protesters brandished bows and arrows as they marched

Indigenous protesters in the Bolivian Amazon have broken through a police blockade to continue a long-distance march on the main city, La Paz.

The protesters forced their way through police lines by taking the Foreign Minister, David Choquehuanca, hostage, officials said.

Mr Choquehuanca - who had come to negotiate with the protesters - has since been released.

The marchers oppose plans to build a road through a rainforest reserve.

Bolivian officials said Mr Choquehuanca was used as a "human shield" by the protesters, along with another government minister and a police commander.

"I was preparing for talks when women surrounded me and then there were problems. There were some who were angry and they forced me to walk," Mr Choquehuanca told the Spanish news agency Efe after his release.

"The fact that they decided to free me is a sign that they want to resolve matters through dialogue," he added.

Bows and arrows

Riot police had been blocking the march for several days to prevent clashes with communities along the route who support the road project.

Indigenous protesters waving flags and brandishing traditional bows and arrows surged through the lines of riot police.



Supporters of the indigenous marchers have staged protests in cities across Bolivia. One officer was wounded, apparently by an arrow which struck his face.

The marchers were advancing on the town of Yucumo, which is populated by migrants from highland Bolivia who have promised to halt their progress.

The dispute over government plans to build a road through the Isiboro-Secure Indigenous Territory and National Park - known by its Spanish acronym TIPNIS - has sharply divided opinion in Bolivia.

The indigenous tribes that live in the reserve say the road would encourage illegal settlement and deforestation in their ancestral Amazon homeland.

But President Evo Morales says the road is vital for national integration and development.

He has also promised strict environmental safeguards.

Hundreds of protesters set off in August on the 500km (310 miles) march from the Amazon town of Trinidad to La Paz, the seat of Bolivia's government in the high Andes.

But last week they were stopped outside Yucumo by police who said they wanted to prevent possible clashes with supporters of President Morales.

The marchers said they had been blocked for political reasons, and were being denied access to food and water.

The protest is an embarrassment for President Morales, who is a prominent advocate of indigenous rights.

The road project has alienated some of the social movements who helped him become Bolivia's first indigenous president, provoking demonstrations across Bolivia.

The highway linking the highland city of Cochabamba with San Ignacio de Moxos in the Amazon lowlands is being funded by Brazil and built by a Brazilian company.