

Indigenous Groups Prevented from Prosecuting Panamanian President



Panama City, July 22 (teleSUR-RHC)-- As the government of Juan Carlos Varela insists on pursuing the *Barro Blanco* hydroelectric project despite its formal suspension over environmental and social concerns, indigenous communities living around the dam marched on Tuesday to the capital to file a lawsuit against Varela.

The president of the Regional Congress of the Ngäbe Buglé Indigenous group, Toribio García, went to the National Assembly in the capital to file a complaint claiming the president had violated the constitution. Garcia was accompanied by members of the Civil Association of Ngäbe-Buglé people living in the capital.

However, three weeks after the National Assembly reopened its parliamentary session, the Commission of Credentials, which is in charge of prosecuting the president, is still not established. The regional leader then attempted to meet with the attorney general but was prevented, as Attorney General Ana Belfon was attending a press conference.

"I am returning to my community disappointed," said Garcia when he was informed the attorney general was away. "Without any doubt the truth is that the lawsuit has been impossible to file because of

interference of the president and other institutions of the state.”

According to Secretary-General of the Civil Association Javier Selles, the president violated the constitution when he began negotiations but continued to pursue construction instead of suspending it.

Because lawmakers could not agree on the Commission of Credentials, the attorney general is required to accept the lawsuit against the president and provide a report to the assembly, Selles said. Members of the Civil Association have been protesting in the Legislative Park demanding the Barro Blanco project end.

In February, Panama’s National Environmental Authority (ANAM) temporarily suspended the construction of the hydroelectric dam over environmental and social concerns. However, on Wednesday the government restarted the project, a minister announced to the local media, allowing the national company Generadora del Istmo (Genisa) to continue the operations while the government reopened negotiations with the indigenous groups who fear a loss of their lands and the contamination of the Tabasara River.

The construction of the dam project was 90 percent complete in May, according to Hydroworld, and is financed by European Banks from Germany and the Netherlands, as well as the Central American Bank of Economic Integration. It had also been approved by the U.N. Clean Development Mechanism.

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