

# Panama's polemic hydroelectric project

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On April 23rd, shareholders of the AES Corporation (based in Arlington, VA) were told that company plans to build three hydroelectric dams on the Changuinola River in Panama will endanger the nearby La Amistad Biosphere Reserve - a UNESCO World Heritage Site - and have already led to serious breaches of the human rights of the indigenous Ngobe people. The shareholders received this news directly from Peter Galvin, Director of the US environmental group Center for Biological Diversity (Tucson, AZ), who used the novel strategy of buying sufficient shares in the company to guarantee him speaking rights at the shareholders' meeting.

Using supporting documentation, Galvin alleged that the project had been associated with the forced relocation of the Ngobe and would cause irreparable damage to the reserve. Galvin told Frontiers: "Many of the shareholders were genuinely shocked to hear of the environmental and social atrocities being carried out by the company they'd invested in".

The project has run into numerous problems. For example, in March 2009, Panama's Defensoría del Pueblo - an independent watchdog

established under Panamanian law - highlighted that the consultation, compensation, and relocation mechanisms used had not considered the rights of indigenous people. This followed an October 2008 hearing by the InterAmerican Commission on Human Rights on the legality of the displacement of the Ngobe tribe and the alleged failure of AES to obtain prior, informed consent (a ruling is pending), and an August 2008 declaration by James Anaya, UN Special Rapporteur on Indigenous Peoples, in which he spoke of arbitrary displacement, the excessive use of force, and the detention of those protesting against the project, including women and children.

However, Humberto González (Manager, AES Changuinola) told Frontiers: "In Changuinola, we have been negotiating a relocation program that provides better housing, health services, and education for the Ngobe people. The program was validated by The Nature Conservancy, the Panamanian National Association for the Conservation of Nature, and the Audubon Society of Panama. AES fully respects human rights in project development and operations".

"Although the dam is outside the World Heritage site itself, it

will likely have an impact on its ecosystems", explains Marc Patry (UNESCO Program Specialist for Latin America and the Caribbean, Paris, France). "We strongly encourage the parties involved to find ways to implement this project that will protect the area's environment and biodiversity." Going further, Galvin says: "AES should immediately halt this environmentally and socially catastrophic venture".