

Sad state of roads a sign of Bolivia's rocky path to development Financing, debt problems stall country's efforts to curb alarming accident toll

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By Jimmy Langman / Special Contributor to The Dallas Morning News

CHUSPIPATA, Bolivia - At the summit of this harrowing one-way dirt road, some Bolivian drivers pause to chew coca leaves and sprinkle Bolivian brandy on the road as an offering to pachamama - Mother Earth in the Andean cultures - in hopes of safe passage.

The road hugs the cliffs of the Andean mountain range as it descends nearly 11,800 feet from Bolivia's capital, La Paz, into the lush tropical jungles of the northern Yungas region. Dubbed "the world's most dangerous road" by the Inter-American Development Bank, the Unduavi-Yolosa highway has a notorious past filled with thousands of accidental deaths. Until recently, on average at least one vehicle per week had gone tumbling over its side during the past 60 years.

It is also a telling symbol of Bolivia's struggle for development. Built by prisoners of the Chaco War, fought between Bolivia and Paraguay from 1932 to 1935, the road remains virtually the only way for farmers of the Yungas region to transport their tropical fruits, coffee and coca leaves - used legally for tea and traditional medicine - to the large market of La Paz. Analysts say Bolivia's lack of good roads remains a major impediment to economic development.

The road's wicked hairpin turns are in some sections no more than 10 1/2 feet wide. Overhanging cliffs menace the tops of trucks and buses, and rain transforms mud puddles into small rivers, loosening the soil and causing landslides. Large rocks sometimes fall from above, while fog scoots across the jungle tops below, making vision difficult.

Tragic events

Last May, a bus carrying 35 passengers was forced to back up on a narrow road ledge to let another vehicle pass. The bus hurtled over the side and into a gorge far below, killing all on board.

The accident launched another round of complaints, and the government finally established a system to organize the flow of traffic. From 8 a.m. to 3 p.m., vehicles may travel only down, and the rest of the time vehicles may only ascend.

According to statistics from Bolivia's national

police, the number of deaths and accidents has declined almost 75 percent because of the rule change.

But on a misty day at the Chuspipata police checkpoint, gateway to the most dangerous portion of the highway, an old Bolivian curse called corruption mocked the nation's laws once again.

Nine cars, trucks and buses had arrived just after 3 p.m., too late to go down the road. They were told to turn around. The drivers, though, persistently flashed Bolivian pesos and kept increasing the number of bills in their hands until the Bolivian policemen finally smiled heartily and let them go down.

Bolivia's police are poor and underpaid. Corruption is notorious among the police force, as well as in other areas of government and society.

More than 70 percent of the nation's 8 million residents live in poverty, and 50 percent live in what the government terms conditions of misery.

In rural areas, according to Bolivian government statistics, only 23.8 percent of Bolivians have access to running water. Just 15.6 percent have electricity, and vast areas lack telephone service. Less than 1 percent have a sewage system, compared with 36 percent in urban areas.

Only 10 percent to 15 percent of Bolivia's roads are considered passable. Bolivia, a country of more than 420,000 square miles, has only 1,860 miles of paved roads, according to the Ministry of Transport and Communications. By comparison, Cuba is less than one-tenth the size of Bolivia but has more than 10,500 miles of paved roads.

In 1995, Bolivia began building a paved two-lane alternate route from La Paz to the Yungas, the Cotapata-Santa Barbara highway, but the lack of financing for an unforeseen tunnel has postponed the project indefinitely.

National debt woes

Lack of financing is at the crux of much of Bolivia's infrastructure and road problems. A principal reason, many economists say, is Bolivia's \$4.6 billion foreign debt, equivalent to almost half the nation's Gross National Product.

Andre Hofman, economic development specialist on Bolivia for the U.N. Economic Commission on Latin America, says the link between Bolivia's debt and lack of infrastructure is vital.

"All of the financing for roads comes from multilateral banks," Mr. Hofman said. "Until very recently, there were no paved roads out of the country. Bolivia's low economic growth is due mostly to poor education programs and to a weak interaction between urban and rural sectors, partly because of the lack of roads."

In 1996, the International Monetary Fund and World Bank launched the Heavily Indebted Poor Country Initiative as its official debt relief program, and Bolivia was one of 41 developing countries included. The program reduced Bolivia's foreign debt by \$450 million.

The United States canceled \$372 million of bilateral debt in 1991 and is considering canceling the rest of its bilateral debt with Bolivia later this year, approximately \$71.2 million.

Most of Bolivia's foreign debt is with international development banks, particularly the Inter-American Development Bank, its biggest creditor. Most of the country's \$1.59 billion bilateral debt is with Japan (\$528 million) and Germany (\$407 million).

Bolivia's current debt continues to drag the country down. More money each year is spent on paying back the foreign debt than on education, health, and other social programs.

Debt problems like Bolivia's are borne by many less-developed countries around the world and are the focus of the Jubilee 2000 Campaign, a major worldwide effort launched by religious organizations to bring about major debt relief for the world's poorest countries this year.

The lack of decent roads and other basic infrastructure compounds the problem by hurting Bolivia's ability to harness resources to pay off the debt, said Mauricio Navarro, Bolivia's minister of transport and communications.

"Most of our poverty in Bolivia is due to our lack of communication by roads," he said. "If we have roads, we can connect to markets in other countries. It will also help our small communities connect with the larger system."

"But because of my country's high indebtedness, we cannot get much more money from international banks," Mr. Navarro added.

Bolivia needs about \$1.5 billion dollars to build all the main roads that it needs, he said.

"It's true, we don't have money for education, health and roads. Bolivia is a poor country," Vice President Jorge Quiroga said in an interview. "But we are probably the premier case study of debt reduction in the hemisphere. You can never get enough of a good thing - the more debt reduction we have, the more we will be able to do."

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