

# Panama Update

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## The Ngobe People Fight for their Survival

**The Ngobe People, the indigenous group with whom we work in our ministry in Cienagueta, are currently engaged in a fight for their survival as a people and their right to self-determination.**

Just over a year ago, the Ngobe led the fight against two controversial laws enacted by the Panamanian Assembly that would have restricted workers' rights to organize and opened the door to widespread strip mining of their ancestral lands. When their peaceful protests were met with brutal repression in which men, women and children were fired upon with tear gas canisters, rubber bullets and shotgun pellets, they rose up en masse and ten thousand Ngobe descended from the mountains and shut down the Pan-American Highway until the government repealed the offending laws. At that time, almost a year ago, President Ricardo Martinelli promised to enact a special law explicitly protecting the Ngobe homeland and their natural resources.



**After months of delays,** the Assembly recently passed a law, but left out the most crucial article, thereby rendering the law practically worthless. The Ngobe felt betrayed and demanded that the government make good on its promise. In an attempt to force the government to the negotiating table, the Ngobe again blocked the Pan-American Highway (a tactic used frequently in Panama by groups with a grievance to air). The Catholic Bishop of David, Jose Luis Lacunza, responded to a government appeal to serve as mediator in the conflict and travelled to the town of San Lorenzo where he received the Ngobe representatives, among them Silvia Carrera, the first Ngobe woman elected as chief of the Ngobe General Congress. The Bishop and the Ngobe waited for four hours but the government representatives never showed up.

**Meanwhile, all telecommunication to the area was cut.**

Government Security Minister Raul Mulino claimed that the Ngobe had sabotaged the cell phone network, but later it

was revealed that the government had issued an illegal order, obligating the phone companies to suspend service in an effort to impede coordination among the protesters. Just before dawn on Sunday morning, government riot squads moved in, using brutal methods not seen since the days of the Noriega dictatorship. The parish house in the town of Tole was gassed as the government accused the priests and nuns of



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“collusion with the enemy.” One young Ngobe university student, Jeronimo Rodriguez Tugri, was shot to death. In David, the government appointed Ombudsman, Patria Portugal, (called the “Defender of the People” in Spanish) denounced that she was roughed up and illegally detained by a Police commander when she objected to the mistreatment of a group of Ngobe children and pregnant women whom she had discovered tied up inside a government transport.

**Thousands of Ngobe responded** by attacking and burning police headquarters in San Felix. Yesterday seven hundred Ngobe abandoned the vegetable farms in the highlands where they serve as migrant workers and descended upon the town of Volcan to express their outrage at the government brutality. When government forces tried to break up the demonstration using tear gas, they were quickly overwhelmed and the police station was set on fire. Civilian groups all across Panama have reacted with sympathy protests. Teachers marching in Santiago yesterday were tear gassed. Construction workers and student groups have also set up street barricades in Panama City and in other cities and towns throughout the country. Rioting is reported in Colon and Bocas del Toro. Protesters have blocked the highway that leads into Panama City. Supermarket magnate Ricardo Martinelli, who was elected by an overwhelming majority just two years ago, has seen his popularity rating plummet. He is now being called a civilian dictator and his Super 99 chain of grocery stores faces a nationwide boycott.

**The Panamanian Red Cross has established operational headquarters** on the grounds of the Methodist Church in David. A year ago, they also set up a field hospital in our Community Center in Cienaguita. We do not know if they have done so again this year because since Saturday night, we have not been able to communicate with Paula Rodriguez, our coordinator in Cienaguita, due to the government ordered communications blackout.



**At this moment a tense calm reigns in Panama** as we await the beginning of a dialogue set to begin this morning (Tuesday) in San Lorenzo. Once again Bishop Lacunza has responded to the invitation to act as mediator. A large contingent of Ngobe who reside in marginalized communities on the outskirts of Panama City are at this moment marching towards the National Assembly and the Presidential Palace in downtown Panama City to call for a peaceful and just resolution to the conflict. They have been joined en route by teachers, students and workers. Others are lining the streets and bringing water to the marchers to show their support. We hope and pray that this time the government will show good faith and not only show up at the negotiating table but also take action to respond to the just demands of the Ngobe People and their aspirations to live in peace with dignity.

***He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God. Micah 6:8***

Reverend Rhett Thompson is a Board of Global Ministries United Methodist missionary assigned to the Republic of Panama, serving as pastor of an Evangelical Methodist Church in Panama City.



In addition to his pastoral duties, Rev. Thompson coordinates efforts of the church to strengthen its outreach into the surrounding low-income neighborhood. Rhett also serves as the National Coordinator of Volunteers in Mission Program in Panama, helping mission teams with construction and medical services projects.

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