



September 24, 2012

Mrs. Irina Bokova
Director General, UNESCO
7, place de Fontenoy
75352 PARIS 07 SP, France

Dear Mrs. Bokova:

We, the group of undersigned civil society organizations in Panama representing more than 35,000 Panamanians, reach out to you with great urgency regarding the construction of the Cinta Costera III highway in front of Casco Viejo, the first permanent European settlement on the Pacific Ocean and a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Despite the Government of Panama's assurances to the World Heritage Committee last June that it would not begin construction of the highway until alternatives had been studied and its impact on Casco Viejo's Universal Values fully analyzed, the highway is in fact being rapidly constructed as the attached photos attest. In the weeks following the Committee's request for careful analysis, the Government of Panama and the contractor, Construtora Norberto Odebrecht SA, hastily prepared studies that they claim prove the need for a seafront highway and its lack of impact on the site. We have not been provided with copies of these studies so we cannot comment, other than to say that no amount of post hoc sophistry will change the fact that less expensive alternative road connection routes exist that have almost no impact on Casco Viejo's Universal Values (one being the tunnel which was originally bid and awarded to Odebrecht for less than the current amount approved for the highway, and the other being expansion of existing road infrastructure behind the site on Avenida de los Martires).

At the same time as Odebrecht's trucks are filling in the sea in front of Casco Viejo's 300-year-old seawall, several miles away it is digging a road through Panama Viejo, the first European settlement on the Pacific, which forms part of the World Heritage Site with Casco Viejo. The case is similar: same contractor and same adamant avoidance of less impactful alternatives for reasons that we believe will ultimately be revealed as benefitting specific business interests. We do not believe this is coincidence. On the contrary, we believe it is symptomatic of a contractor and special interest-driven orthodoxy of infrastructure that in the long run represents as great a threat to heritage in the developing world as the religiously motivated destruction we recently witnessed in Mali and Afghanistan. Bearing in mind the Declaration adopted during the 36th Session and the universal condemnation of the destruction of Timbuktu sites, we believe that the international community has to be informed of this situation which is nothing less than the intentional destruction of the universal exceptional value of a World Heritage Site under the guise of "progress."

It is troubling that the Government of Panama with the help of Odebrecht has managed to exploit openings in the World Heritage protection framework to avoid being put on the list of World Heritage Sites in danger, which is the mechanism intended by the World Heritage Convention framers to be triggered upon detection of an imminent threat to a site. The public bidding of a tunnel and immediate change to a seafront highway were no doubt the first steps in an elaborate plan to evade UNESCO's early warning mechanism. Subsequent steps included blocking ICOMOS technical visits at key moments, submitting incomplete documentation, lying outright to the World Heritage Committee in St. Petersburg about the project not having been started and politicizing the Committee's proceedings.

The sum of these actions has been to create a blueprint for evasion of the World Heritage protection process, eroding UNESCO's credibility as well as that of the Advisory organizations, such as ICOMOS. We believe this will turn out to be a seminal case for UNESCO because of

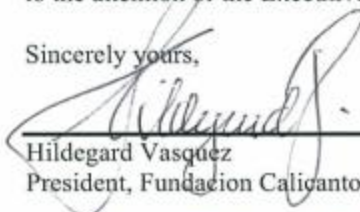
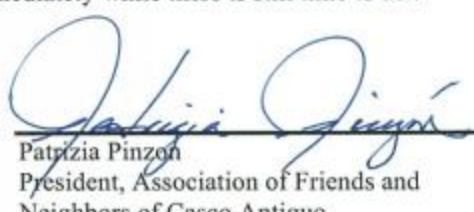

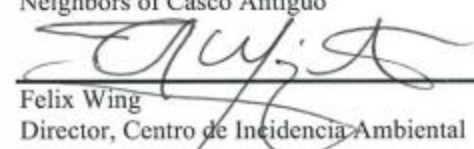
its visibility and the precedent it sets, and it will influence the fate of Panama's other World Heritage Sites, all of which are under great pressure from development and lack of proper care, as the Committee has so frequently warned successive administrations. As a highly prominent public work in a growing tourism destination, this may be the Latin American equivalent of the highway that threatened Giza Pyramids, which threat UNESCO was so instrumental in thwarting.

Thousands in Panama have been fighting for nearly two years to prevent the project. We have filed numerous law suits, demonstrated, suffered threats to our safety and property and watched with deep sadness as our government and Odebrecht cynically turned protection of heritage into a divisive class issue. But the forces behind the project are as strong as our legal systems are weak. Should highways be built in front of Casco Viejo and through Panama Viejo we are convinced they will be considered crimes against World Heritage by Panamanians and visitors alike for generations, and questions will forever remain: what did UNESCO do? How was the site not put on the in danger list when the threat was so obvious for so long and even UNESCO's own advisors had called for it? If history shows that corrupt contractors and politicians were involved it only begs the question: isn't that precisely the type of threat contemplated by the World Heritage Convention?

We will not go into detail regarding our suspected reasons for the insistence by Odebrecht and the Government on a seafront route in front of Casco Viejo, other than to mention that the local press has unearthed evidence regarding planned private developments that would be serviced by a seafront highway, and that the current budget for the project is close to \$70 million per lane mile, making it an extraordinarily expensive road project. This will of course not be mentioned when the Government of Panama pleads for the World Heritage Committee to be "pragmatic" next June after the highway is almost complete and claims that the alternatives were not economically feasible. It will, however, be part of the case study as the situation is dissected in years to come.

Director General, we watch the machines destroy our heritage every day, but there is still a small window of time. We are here and we are fighting, but we need UNESCO to act in favor of humanity and use its voice to help us protect our heritage. We urge you to bring this matter to the attention of the Executive Committee immediately while there is still time to act.

Sincerely yours,


Hildegard Vasquez
President, Fundacion Calicanto
Patrizia Pinzon
President, Association of Friends and
Neighbors of Casco Antiguo
Fernando Diaz Jaramillo
Alianza Pro-Ciudad
Felix Wing
Director, Centro de Incidencia Ambiental

On Behalf of the following organizations:

Asociación de Vecinos y
Amigos del Casco Antiguo
Fundación Calicanto
Alianza Pro Ciudad
El Colectivo

Almanaque Azul
Fundación Panamá Sostenible
Fundación Belisario Porras
Fundación para el Desarrollo
de la Libertad Ciudadana

Centro de Estudio y
Capacitación Familiar
Asociación Panameña de
Derecho Constitucional
Federación de Comunidades
Revertidas.

cc: Mrs. Alissandra Cummins, Chairperson, UNESCO Executive Board

La foto de la semana

Avanza construcción de Cinta Costera III



Dentro de las obras de vialidad que se vienen realizando en la ciudad capital, están avanzando los trabajos de la Cinta Costera III, que forma parte del Plan de Reordenamiento Vial y eje de conexión entre la Avenida de los Poetas y el Corredor Sur. El proyecto incluye un puente marino de 2 kilómetros.

Source: La Prensa Newspaper

