

Blockade Ends on Day 19

15.04.13



At 6:30 a.m. last Thursday we heard rallying chants from the military police gathering in Copacabana's main plaza. Soon afterward, the roar of truck and bus engines broke the morning quiet. As they'd done since last Monday morning, the troops headed back up into the mountains to guard the road from La Paz.

About two hours later loads of residents gathered in the plaza to salute a select delegation headed out to the lake – neutral territory where protesters couldn't reach them – to try to hammer out a solution to the problem. The delegation included representatives from Copacabana, the peninsula's four sectors, and Tiquina and Tito Yupanqui, the two villages vying for a bridge over Lake Titicaca connecting to La Paz, Copacabana, and millions of tourist dollars. The delegation was 100% male.

There were actually two different blockades. The first one, from March 25 to April 7, was mandated by the provincial government in protest over the rogue piracy of boat pilots who ferry people and vehicles across the Strait of Tiquina. By crossing at Tiquina, the 70-mile trip from La Paz takes about 3.5 hours. The pilots randomly raise rates, spontaneously strike, and take dangerous risks. One can avoid the strait by crossing into Perú, curving around the southern tip of the lake and re-entering Bolivia, for a 9-hour trip. So the other point of the first blockade was to demand a bridge be built over the Strait of Tiquina.

The second blockade, from April 8 to 12, was a counter-protest staged by the people of Tito Yupanqui. Someone might have foolishly promised them a triple-span bridge would land in their village, linking La Paz and Copacabana. That route would have lopped off a third of the time and distance between La Paz and Copacabana, and of course, it would have sky-rocketed tiny Tito Yupanqui's economy. More likely the people of Tito Yupanqui saw foreign engineers conducting months-long feasibility studies, and concluded, wrongly, that the bridge would be theirs. Alas, the studies showed a triple bridge there would seriously harm the sacred lake, and would cost \$600 million USD. When the first blockade was resolved with the decision to build a \$200 million bridge at Tiquina, the people of Tito Yupanqui blamed Copacabana.



Violence and Fear



They revolted, gorilla style. For two days they climbed peaks above Copa and hurled down dynamite. The explosions fell far short of the town and our home, but likely damaged crops and grazing land. The *Tito Yupanquiniños* threatened to cut off Copacabana's power and water supply lines and storm the village. In case we had to quickly relocate to our more-secure church up the street, Jeff and I packed essentials – flashlights, candles, our computers and cell phones, the first aid kit, a few packets of dehydrated food, some clothes and alpaca blankets, and our passports. As you can see, they were so far away that even using



telephoto it was hard to get a photo of them or the explosions. Still, it was disconcerting to see this from atop the rocks in our backyard. *(Above left, plumes of dynamite smoke rise.)*

Copa was miserable and scared. Even very old people had never seen anything like this – blockades of two or three days are common, and rarely violent. The arrival of 500 armed military police last Monday was somewhat comforting, but troubling, too. They carried tear gas guns and battle shields. Every morning last week, they were up at dawn, chanting battle songs before their trucks rumbled them up to the mountains where they stood guard over Copa.



Above: We took a walk out the blockaded road to the Perú border. These are just 3 of the 10 blockades we encountered.

Our *Copacabaniño* friends had expected Holy Week to be their most lucrative business week of the year. Normally, it is. This year they can't even pay their rent. The entire town was shut down for nearly three weeks. One could still buy beef in the market, but chickens, which are processed in Perú or La Paz, were scarce; only once a contraband poultry truck made it from La Paz, through the southern tip of Perú and south again to the border 8 k from Copa. From there, the chicken had to be loaded on push carts small enough to navigate around

the blockades. Meat vendors wouldn't risk buying a quick-to-spoil pig, or even sharing the cost of one among other meat vendors, when most customers had no money. News broadcasts from La Paz estimated that during Holy Week alone, Copa lost \$1 million in tourist revenue.



From March 25 when the *bloqueo* started, until Friday April 12 Copa received no milk, cheese or produce from La Paz (though one could sometimes buy a re-purposed 2-liter Coke bottle filled with fresh, unpasteurized milk from a local dairy farmer). Fruits and vegetables, all at least 19 days old and not refrigerated, were black, slimy, or both – but still for sale, as that was all there was. Greenhouse growers here on the peninsula couldn't make it into Copa because even the rural roads were blocked with felled trees or heaps of rocks and dirt. Last Thursday, thanks to a military escort, Copa received her first shipments of milk and cheese! Hallelujah!



Also on Thursday a gasoline tanker truck got through. Armed military police rode on top of the tanker, which was also surrounded by armed police on motorcycles and in SUVs. With some gas in the tank at Copa's only gas station (typically open only one or two days a week), taxis and buses are back on the roads again, as are the handful of privately owned cars.

Friday morning we learned that at 2 a.m. the delegation on the lake had come to a compromise: the bridge would be built at Tiquina, Tito Yupanqui would not impose blockades nor terrorize Copa for 30 days, and a civic committee would represent every peninsula community during the planning, design and construction of the bridge.

The compromise was announced at a mandatory town meeting that should have started at 2 p.m., actually started at 3:10, and ended at 7:45. Before the town elected representatives, the mayor led a 3- or 4-minute prayer seeking God's wisdom and guidance surrounding the election of the committee and the conduct of its work.



A Recap of Events

Mon. March 25, Holy Week – First Blockade begins, Copa is shut down, the Cathedral’s gates are padlocked. Residents of every *zona* have mandatory blockade assignments. Ours is on the La Paz Road above our neighborhood. 5 hours.

Wed. March 27, Holy Week – Media crews descend on Copa, residents converge on the plaza in a show of solidarity.

Mon. April 1 -- Mandatory town meeting to assure residents of protection and food. 4 hours.

Tues. April 2 – Mandatory *zona* meeting to assess public opinion, which favors the Tiquina bridge, and to elect representatives to serve in the conflict resolution process. One of our neighbors, clearly tipsy, speaks long and vociferously, regularly slurring his words. Later, he’s nominated to represent our neighborhood, but he doesn’t respond to the nomination. Several neighbors call out, “He’s passed out!” The vote: unanimously in favor of drunk guy passed out in the street. 4 hours.

Thurs. April 4 – Mandatory *zona* work day. Every household must send at least one worker from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., to haul and spread 18 truckloads of rock, stone, and fine gravel for the foundation of the neighborhood’s new multi-functional center.. 8 hard but fun hours.



Sat. April 6 – The national government orders a navy ship, loaded with 1,000 canisters of cooking gas, to sail to Copa. Fearing there won’t be enough for everyone, residents panic and race for the harbor. 4 hours.

Below center: Jeff and our neighbors Dorita and Claudia are tagged. They teamed up to help each other get through the crowd and then transport the canisters the 12 blocks (10 of which are up hill) back to our neighborhood.



Sun. April 7 – To reduce stress, the national government ships free food to Copa: 300 150-pound bags of sugar! A friend of ours drags his wheelbarrow from Huacuyo Valley, a 2.5-hour hike from Copa. We bump into him hefting his sugar, some chicken feed and two cans of sardines up the mountain heading back toward Huacuyo. For our pal Juan, probably 2.5 hours hiking with an empty wheelbarrow, 3 to 4 hours' waiting in line, and 3 to 4 hours grueling, uphill, mountain hike with a 150-pound load.
Fri. April 12 – Mandatory town meeting announcing the compromise and the end of the blockade. 5.5 hours.

Today

Copa's nearly back to normal. A squadron of military police still mills around town, but they're relaxed and jovial. They amble around munching *salchipapas* (French fries with sliced hot dogs, slathered in condiments – our friend Ana, at right, makes the best in Copa), *saltenas* or *tucumanas* (respectively, baked or fried, savory-stuffed dough pockets). Street food vendors, newly back in business, welcome the income.

Saturday our neighbors invited us to join them in a pick-up soccer game.



Market streets throng with vendors and buyers. For three weeks residents literally wore their radios to hear the news; now they're once again listening to music. Travelers from all over the world choke the tourist areas, and the buses and minibuses that brought them honk their ways through the crowds. Residents are smiling and laughing again. Street dogs' tails are mostly up and wagging. Instead of attacking garbage and each other to defend their precious morsels, they're back to grazing on scraps tossed by benevolent curb-side diners. The Cathedral bells, silent for nearly three weeks, again toll matins and vespers every day. Ancient, cracked, and atonal as they are, it's good to hear them again.



We were tense and rattled for a while. But we're now basking in a post-stress bubble of gratitude: our Aymará friends and we are safe, well, and happy.

Let us hear from you, please.

With Love and Gratitude,
Deb and Jeff

