

Hunger Strike against Trinidad Highway Continues

Written by Dawn Paley

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UPDATE December 6, 2012: [After issuing a binding declaration yesterday evening that would bring about the stoppage of construction of Mon Desir to Debe, Dr Kublalsingh began to receive an IV to reintroduce his body to food as soon as possible. This morning, however, reports stated that work on the highway was continuing. It is not clear at this time what action Dr. Kublalsingh has decided to take.](#)

It has been three weeks since Dr. Wayne Kublalsingh has had a sip of water or a bite of food. He's edging perilously close to death, but remains steadfast in his demand that a segment of new highway project that would bisect rich lagoon lands on the island of Trinidad be re-routed.

"In spirit he's very strong, his eyes are bright, his voice is strong," said Judy Kublalsingh, a practicing attorney who is also Wayne's sister, in an interview from Port of Spain on Friday. By Tuesday, onlookers said his speech had slowed, that he was much weaker. Today, at 21 days into his strike, there is substantial risk that his heart or kidneys could fail without warning or that he slips into a coma.

Even though his health has deteriorated, Kublalsingh managed to reiterate his demands to supporters in Port of Spain yesterday.

"All he is asking for is accountability and transparency," said Vandana Boodhai, a member of the Highway Re-route Movement of which Kublalsingh is part. "Today, he outlined the three main things he wanted from the government: he wanted a feasibility study done, he wanted a hydrology report, and he wanted a cost benefit analysis done on the highway, to show the social impacts and all the negative aspects," she said.

Once the government produces those documents, Kublalsingh said he would stop his hunger strike. But it isn't clear if Kublalsingh's demands will be met in time to save his life. "[Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar] has made it very clear that she is not going to stop the project, and she has said he is refusing to meet with her, but that is not the case," said Boodhai.

The section of road contested by the Highway Re-route movement is just over nine kilometers long. It is slated to run from Debe to Mon Desir, impacting hundreds of people who live and

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farm in the Oropouche Lagoon. During an [interview](#) this summer, Kublalsingh said that if built, the roadway would destroy 1,000 acres of farmland, 300 homes, and create permanent flooding.

Like many of Kublalsingh's supporters, Boodhai's house is slated for destruction if the contested portion of the highway is built.

"Presently where I reside there are five homes in this district, and these five homes would be demolished as well, so the entire family would be broken up, and we have a very close knit community," she said. "Most of the people living here are old people and if you look at the human side of it, it is very unfair and inhumane to move these people from a place...where they have built a life, where lands are passed on from generation to generation."

The flood embankments that would be constructed to allow the highway to be built could also result in harsh consequences for residents and the natural environment, according to the Highway Re-Route Movement.

Kublalsingh, an Oxford trained professor and the second of eight children, has the support of his family and of people around the world. He has declared that he will not die, and that as when he helped stop the construction of smelters on the island, this will be another [victory](#) for environmental and social movements in Trinidad.

The hunger strike "is really a critique of manner in which government is operated in this country in terms of the development decisions that they've made," said Judy Kublalsingh. "Wayne's position...the principle has remained the same, he's saying that any decision that the government makes, especially as it relates to the development of a country must take into account how the persons around it are going to be directly impacted and what is best in the national interest as well as the environment."

The matter of the highway is also currently in the courts, but the government has sent work crews to begin clearing land and bulldozing fruit trees in preparation for construction. Some members of Trinidad and Tobago's government have made harsh statements against Kublalsingh's strike, willing the government to let him die for the cause.

"Wayne has chosen to ignore what the doctor's advice has been and to trust what he says is his own knowledge of his body," Judy Kublalsingh, who acknowledged that her brother's doctor is "a little bit bewildered" that he is so healthy after three weeks receiving nothing but the occasional IV drip, which he has since begun to refuse.

"He says he's feeling cold and weak and you can see that he's shaky, and the hunger strike is become more pronounced, the toll it's taking on him is more pronounced," said Boodhai in an interview with Upside Down World at the end of day 20 of the strike.

Kublalsingh continues to spend his days under a makeshift shelter in front of the Prime Minister's office. Each day, his supporters – his students, people from the communities slated for destruction if the highway is built, environmentalists, musicians, and others – gather around

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Kublalsingh. They are forbidden from pitching tents or even bringing chairs, so they gather on the narrow shoulder of the road, holding umbrellas to keep off the sun, and wait.

Recently, the national transparency institute and the Construction Workers Association also came out in support of Kublalsingh's demands.

"I support Wayne relentlessly in terms of the struggle that he has adopted, of course as a family we're conflicted and we're very fearful for his health," said Judy Kublalsingh. "But Wayne has asked me to respect that he has adopted a particular position... and he has asked us to trust what he attempting to do."

Kublalsingh's decision to risk his life refusing food and water is all about putting pressure on the government. According to his supporters, international pressure on the government of Trinidad and Tobago to re-route the Debe to the Mon Desir portion of the highway project could prevent the displacement of over a dozen agricultural communities, as well as help save his life.

"What we're asking is to put pressure on this government to make the right decision, to keep its promise to the people, they had promised these people that they would not build a segment of the highway before they came as a government and walked with the people and talked with the people, and they came as a government and they made this decision in breach of a promise that they made previously," said Judy Kublalsingh.