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Healthcare Reform Protest

On 16 June, the streets of the capital city were filled with demonstrators protesting the various proposals to privatize portions of the country's healthcare system. The protest was sponsored by several NGOs and the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) and began at the Reloj de Flores monument in downtown San Salvador and concluded 12 blocks later in front of the Rosales National Hospital.

In '02-'03 these marches were a regular occurrence to protest the privatization policies of then-President Francisco Flores. The recent demonstrators were protesting the current National Republican Alliance (ARENA) government for using those same policies.

President Elías Antonio Saca assured the protesters and the general public that no part of the healthcare proposal currently being debated in the Legislative Assembly contains plans for privatization. Saca also said that now there are many licensed services and they are necessary, but this does not represent any type of privatization.

"This debate of privatization is a political ghost that wants to bring back an issue that is already dead; here there is no privatization," insisted the president. As a response to the healthcare controversy, President Saca contributed 30 ambulances to the Solidarity Fund for Healthcare.

Protest Against Mining Exploitation

The National Committee Against Metal Mining and the Latin American Observatory of Environmental Conflicts (OLCA) came to the conclusion on 15 June that the only way to stop mining exploitation in northern El Salvador is through resistance, information and organization of the communities that are directly affected.

Since '06 the resistance by these communities has intensified against the mining projects that El Salvador is silently advancing, in part by the foreign companies interested in mining metals in El Salvador.

An example of their resistance was when a caravan of cars arrived at the Legislative Assembly on 15 June to demand discussion and approval of the new mining law, which would protect the communities affected by mining exploitation.

The National Committee presented a first draft of the law in Dec '06, however, there has been no response to the draft to date. The committee representatives explained that allowing mining exploitation in the country is a threat to the environment, because mining requires the use of large quantities of water, which will use up the aquifer reserves.

To date, more than 20 exploration permits have been given to foreign mining companies by the Salvadoran government. Information from the National Committee explains that companies, such as Canadian Pacific Rim, have begun to use these permits for an initial process of exploration in the northern region of El Salvador.

The ministries of the Economy and the Environment, which are in charge of granting these types of permits, have not given total endorsements, only initial exploration permits to these companies; but David Pereira, a member of the National Committee, stated that the authorities should not be trusted on this issue. Many social organizations, which do not trust the Minister of the Environment, have said that, before granting permits, the ministry will have to conduct an environmental impact study, as required by the Environmental Law. The National Committee and the OLCA hope that the companies will not be allowed to produce their own environmental impact studies, but rather that neutral environmental agencies will be contracted to conduct them.

New US Aid to Bring More Development

El Salvador is one of 41 developing countries that have qualified to receive assistance from the US-Government-funded Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), based on its commitment to sound political and economic policies. The government of El Salvador has decided to devote the \$460 million in MCC assistance to the country's northern region, which has long trailed the rest of the country in terms of economic development.

One of the key impediments to development in that region is the lack of good roadways. Much of the region is served only by dirt roads, and it is often necessary to follow indirect routes to drive between neighboring communities. The MCC aid will fund the construction of a 300-km longitudinal highway across the northern region and another 240 km of secondary farm-to-market roads.

The new highway will include a bridge across the Río Lempa, the country's largest river, linking Ciudad Dolores to Nuevo Edén de San Juan. "The highway will improve our export capabilities and give us access to national markets," Orlando Romero, mayor of Ciudad Dolores, told USINFO. He said he hopes to see local farmers take advantage of this improved market access to diversify their production from corn and bean crops to higher-value fruit produce, such as mangos.

The MCC hopes to encourage growth in nontraditional agricultural production and has set aside \$87 million to invest in business development for those farmers who wish to explore such opportunities. The corporation is prepared to provide technical assistance and financial support to help farmers overcome the initial risk of changing their production patterns.

The MCC is performing extensive environmental and economic impact studies before it begins executing its projects in early '08. According to the MCC, every effort is being made to consider the interests of all those who will be affected by the program.

Protocol Against Torture

On 26 June, the Commission of Human Rights in El Salvador (CDHES) organized a forum about the Facultative Protocol to the Convention against Torture in order to learn about the experiences of signatory countries, in hopes that El Salvador also would ratify the agreement.

The Protocol was initiated on 22 June '06, after 22 countries signed on; it works with the participating countries to create conditions for the eradication of torture—the majority of which are being committed in prisons—while at the same time creating prevention, attention and rehabilitation programs for the victims.

However, El Salvador has not yet approved this treaty, which is why the State must analyze this possibility, said Miguel Montenegro, of the CDHES. “We want the State to participate in this forum so they will learn more of the experiences of different countries, such as Honduras, and in order to discuss and analyze the position of El Salvador on the issue of torture,” said Montenegro.

The representative of CDHES, an NGO, assured that as a human rights organization, it considers it important for El Salvador to be part of this Protocol, because the country has a history of torture cases that were committed during the previous armed conflict, and cases today that have originated in prisons.

The idea of the Protocol was born in the Human Rights World Conference celebrated in Vienna, from 14-25 June '93. At that meeting the countries considered it necessary to eradicate torture and other cruel and unusual punishments. But the creation of this Protocol did not come to fruition until '06. To date, of all the countries of Central America, only Honduras and Costa Rica are signatories.

—*Christina Patchett*