

MESOAMERICA

Volume 26, Number 6, June 2007



EL SALVADOR

Confiscation Creates Bedlam

On the afternoon of 12 May, the National Civil Police (PNC) carried out a massive confiscation operation targeting the organized street vendors working in downtown San Salvador. Among the items seized were CDs, movies, shoes and other items believed to be pirated. In response to the police action, about 200 street vendors organized a protest that resulted in serious confrontations.

A number of people who the vendors' movement considered unaffiliated with their protest responded by setting fire to a police car and a truck belonging to *Telecorporación Salvadoreña*. At the same time, several people took advantage of the disorder to rob stores in the area, which created panic and concern among the bystanders.

Two hours after the chaos began, 150 anti-riot police arrived and responded by throwing tear gas and shooting rubber bullets at protestors.

The National Theater, National Palace and the Metropolitan Cathedral were surrounded by a curtain of smoke resulting from the pandemonium created by the protestors and the PNC. The police reported that they arrested 17 people, some for failure to respond to orders issued by authorities and for disobeying the police by entering the controlled area.

The vendors' movement is in its second year of organizing at the national level, in response to CAFTA and related regulations criminalizing those who challenge new intellectual property laws by selling "pirated" goods.

Immediately after the arrests of the 17 individuals, President Antonio Saca and Minister of Security René Figueroa publicly called the vendors "terrorists." When asked about the vendors at a press conference the next day, Saca replied, "they are terrorists—the correct word is 'terrorist' for anyone who flips over a car and burns it or attacks a business ... anyone who sells something illegal on the streets must go to prison."

The National Republican Alliance (ARENA) government is attempting to apply newly-created legal forms of dealing with such disturbances by means of the Anti-Terrorism Law and the Anti-

Organized Crime Law. These laws take crimes formerly defined as acts of vandalism or public disorder and redefine them as “terrorism” punishable by decades in prison.

The spokesman for the Rescue Command confirmed that through the day they attended to approximately 150 people, including one injured police officer and a first aid helper who were attacked by the crowd. In addition, during the disturbances the demonstrators threw stones at ambulances and also were seen threatening journalists covering the event.

El Salvador and Honduras Sign FTA with Taiwan

On 7 May, El Salvador and Honduras signed a free-trade agreement with Taiwan. However, the legislatures of all three countries must first ratify the treaty before it can go into effect. If this happens, the two Central American countries will be able to export thousands of tons of sugar, coffee, fruit, soaps and more than 3,800 other products tariff-free to Taiwan, while Taiwan will export plastics, vehicle parts and electronics, about 3,600 products in all, to these two countries.

This agreement, the product of four rounds of negotiations that started in June '06, is scheduled to begin in Jan '08 and to reach full implementation in phases every year for the next 10 years. All three countries will reportedly benefit from the trade agreement in terms of industry, agriculture, telecommunications, finance and investment.

The free-trade agreement was signed by Taiwan's Economics Minister, El Salvador's Economics Minister, and Honduras' Minister of Development, Industry and Commerce. Salvadoran President Antonio Saca and Honduran President Manuel Zelaya also attended the signing ceremony.

This is the sixth free-trade agreement for El Salvador, leading President Saca to proclaim, “This is the logic of the world. We cannot take a step back. The world is opening its borders.” Taiwan already has agreements with Nicaragua, Guatemala and Panama.

According to the framework of this agreement, Taiwan will provide technical support to assist the two Central American countries with their exports. Taiwan's Ministry of Economic Affairs estimated its trade with the two nations at \$80.4 million, of which Taiwan enjoyed an advantage of \$62.5 million.

However, the move is seen as more political than economic for Taiwan. The two Central American countries are among only 24 in the world that recognize the island nation, which China claims as its own and considers a renegade province. Fifteen of Taiwan's 25 diplomatic allies are in Latin America and Taipei is trying to use trade to consolidate political support.

Taiwan also is seeking to sign FTA's with countries that do not formally recognize its independence, such as Japan, South Korea, Singapore and Chile, but these countries are reluctant to do so for fear of angering China.

President Saca Visits Salvadoran Troops in Iraq

President Saca took advantage of his tour of the Middle East to visit the Salvadoran troops stationed in Iraq. Currently, El Salvador is the only Latin American country with troops in Iraq as part of the US-led coalition.

The president left Egypt in a US military airplane on 23 May bound for Iraq, accompanied by Salvadoran Minister of Defense Gen. Otto Romero and Minister of Security and Justice René Figueroa, along with his private secretaries and the presidential press advisor.

President Saca traveled to Alkut, Iraq, where he met for three hours with the Salvadoran troops at Camp Delta to thank them and applaud the work that the Eighth Contingent is doing. "I feel proud as president, as general commander of the armed forces and as a Salvadoran of the labor that you are carrying out here far from your homeland," expressed the Chief of State.

During the visit Saca was greeted by Jeque Niama, leader of the province of Babel, who thanked the members of the Eighth Contingent for their help on 209 projects they have conducted in the area, such as with the education, healthcare, electricity and drinking water infrastructures. In addition, Saca received reports from US military authorities about developing activities in Iraq.

Diverse sectors in El Salvador have expressed opposition to the US-led war and occupation of Iraq, due to the false arguments used by the US to justify its invasion.

El Salvador Joins Global Walk to End Child Hunger

El Salvador participated for the first time in the Global Walk to End Child Hunger as part of an international contribution against undernourishment in children around the world, which was simultaneously conducted in 117 countries on 13 May.

An estimated 10,000 Salvadorans from all sectors joined together in the cause. "This is a symbolic event because the issue of undernourishment is a national problem that should be put before political parties; it is both a product and demonstration of poverty," said Carlo Scaramella, a Salvadoran representative of the World Food Program (WFP).

The annual march, sponsored by the WFP (an agency of the United Nations), began in '03 as part of the fulfillment and promotion of the objectives of the Millennium Project.

The walk was supported by government authorities, diplomats, artists, athletes and non-governmental organizations. "Although we have progressed, we still need to achieve more. But if we continue working, we will reach our goals," affirmed President Saca.

Scaramella said that El Salvador's state of undernourishment is better than that of other countries in Central America, such as Nicaragua, Honduras or Guatemala.

The United Nations has calculated that 820 million people suffer from hunger in the world. In Central America at least seven million inhabitants live in this condition. According to the official data recorded in '00 in El Salvador, one out of every five children is undernourished.

Contaminated Reservoir Attracts Birds

The Cerrón Grande reservoir, a man-made lake now filled with sewage and industrial waste that was built in '74 to supply El Salvador's largest hydroelectric plant, is mystifying scientists by attracting thousands of migratory and sea birds.

The government estimates that the 33,360-acre reservoir collects about 3,800 tons of excrement each year from sewage pipes, as well as waste from 54 industrial plants, 55 coffee processing plants and seven sugar mills; the water contains traces of heavy metals such as chromium and lead.

Scientists are puzzled that approximately 150,000 seabirds from more than 130 species have chosen to make the polluted reservoir their home. At least 90 of the species are migratory birds arriving from as far away as Alaska.

Biologists have been monitoring bird numbers at the reservoir since '01, but marine biologist Oscar Molina said the country lacked the funds to carry out a full investigation into why so many of them are attracted to the area. "It's one of the most contaminated lakes we have, which is why we should carry out a study on why the birds are here," said Molina.

Environment Ministry ornithologist Ricardo Ibarra said birds might be attracted by sandy beaches crawling with insects that appear around the edge of the lake in the dry season. But the contamination must be harming birds that feed and nest there, possibly making them too weak to be able to continue their migratory flights or affecting the strength of the shells of their eggs, Ibarra warned.

Agronomist Edgardo Erazo, who studies wildlife at the reservoir, said scraps of plastic and metal had been discovered in bird nests around the lake, which is a cause for concern.

—*Christina Patchett*