

# ***MESOAMERICA***

*Volume 25, Number 11, November 2006*

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## **EL SALVADOR**

### **Water Problems**

El Salvador has a serious water problem. The lack of drinking water and sanitation in many poorer parts of the country is a cause of continuing concern.

One of the problems is the mismanagement of water resources. There is not enough fresh water due to deforestation, rapid and unorganized urbanization, as well as the government's inability to purify the water that is being distributed. In addition, there is a lack of public policies, institutional interest and enforcement of water regulations.

Another problem is that the distribution of water and water-related services is in the hands of five different sectors: public, private, municipal, community and a combination of these. El Salvador's public water company, the National Administration of Water and Sewage Systems (ANDA), does not regulate the other water suppliers, and there is a lack of overall standards in regards to the supply, distribution and purification of water.

In '02 only 53% of the population had access to running water in their homes. Of these, only 24% of the people were receiving clean drinking water. The lack of treated water seems to have taken the biggest toll on children. About 12,000 die each year in El Salvador due to water-related illnesses such as diarrhea, viruses, cholera and parasites.

Often, drinking water is sold in large plastic containers to those who can afford to pay the high prices charged by private providers; the cost averages between \$10 and \$15 a month, while the average income of a Salvadoran worker is \$158 a month.

The administration of President Antonio Saca is leaning towards privatization as a solution to the problems of poor water quality and water distribution. A General Water Law has been presented to Congress by the ARENA party, and is currently being discussed. This law lays the foundation for privatization of all water systems (Vol. 25, No. 4). If the law passes, ANDA, as well as municipality and community water services could lose control over their water supplies. To date, no private companies are bidding for water rights, but the General Water Law is the first step in that direction. Salvadorans are worried that the proposed General Water Law will further jeopardize their access to water and are concerned because this law proposal was drafted and presented to Congress without the participation of Salvadoran citizens.

Many Salvadorans do not believe that privatization is the best move for the water industry. The privatization of the General Superintendence of Energy and Telecommunications (SIGET) meant higher electricity and telephone rates, less availability, lower quality and a lack of independent control over the services; many worry that water could follow a similar path. During the first year of privatization of SIGET, electricity rates rose 120% whereas the highest price increase when SIGET provided the service was 30% (Vol. 19, No. 1). Some citizens fear that an increase in water prices due to privatization will leave those unable to pay without water.

Privatization does not seem to be the answer for an improvement in the water supply system either. In Soyapango, a suburb of San Salvador that is served by a private water company, residents still experience problems. People complain that although water bills are paid on time the community is sometimes left without any water for 10 to 15 days, but the water bill is not adjusted, and often the available water is contaminated and undrinkable.

On 17 Oct, people from various sectors of society took to the streets to protest the proposed General Water Law and the privatization of the water industry. During the march, protestors dressed up as the president of ANDA, the Minister of the Environment and Natural Resources, the Minister of Health, journalists of mainstream media and corporate representatives. These representative figures were handcuffed and taken to a downtown plaza where they were “put on trial” and sentenced for being corrupt and unjust by violating the citizens’ rights to water. Activists announced that they will keep up their organizing efforts to prevent water privatization and to guarantee the right of universal access to water.

### **Health Workers Strike**

Public health workers in San Salvador led protests on 25 Oct, demanding a salary increase and needed medical supplies, as well as the hiring of more medical workers. This protest was part of a three-week strike led by the Workers’ Union of the Salvadoran Social Security Institute (STISSS) that started on 16 Oct as a means of putting pressure on the administration to raise the salaries of Salvadoran Social Security Institute (ISSS) workers.

The protest on 25 Oct, initiated by the General Union for Healthcare Workers (SIGESAL) and the STISSS, started by setting up blockades across the intersection of Alameda Juan Pablo II and 25 Avenida Norte in front of Hospital Rosales in the western part of the city. The protestors held posters saying, “Due to the high prices of goods employees demand fair salaries” and “The fight is just.” About 400 healthcare workers burned tires and confronted the police before lifting the blockade and proceeding down 25 Avenida Norte to the Legislative Assembly where healthcare workers presented their petitions.

The general secretary of SIGESAL said that the hospitals need to have more doctors and healthcare employees to meet the needs of the population. Doctors and nurses say the lack of supplies, specifically medications, are among the most serious problems facing public healthcare.

During the strike, 48 medical centers of the state-owned medical facilities (ISSS) were taken over by the STISSS, and about 85% of the 13,500 ISSS employees refused to work. The director of Hospital Médico Quirúrgico y Oncológico stated various times in an interview with *El Diario de Hoy* on 27 Oct that during the strike the directors of the hospitals and other ISSS officials had absolutely no control over their institutions and they did not know what was going on inside the hospitals. Furthermore, the archives had been closed and locked and authorities did not have access to files, patient histories or test results. The majority of public hospitals of the ISSS system were only

attending to emergency patients, while some were closed all together. All other appointments and consultations were canceled during the strike, which left at least 19,000 people unattended.

Three of the four planned negotiation meetings between the STISSS and the ISSS to end the strike were unsuccessful. The STISSS was demanding an increase of \$100 in the monthly salary of its members, starting in Sep. But the ISSS negotiators were firm in saying that there were no funds to increase salaries by more than \$25 or \$35 monthly. The STISSS was equally firm in its threats that the strike would continue and even be extended to more health centers and community clinics if the negotiations remained unfavorable.

However, the strike ended on 10 Nov, when the two parties finally agreed on an eventual raise of \$80 monthly for all ISSS workers: \$40 monthly starting 1 Nov '06, \$10 more as of Nov '07 and \$30 more by May '08. These salary increases will result in an annual expenditure of \$27.5 million for the ISSS after the latter date.

As soon as this collective bargaining agreement was reached, the striking ISSS members returned to work, and the ISSS regained control of its hospitals, community clinics and healthcare centers and began to make arrangements for the reassigning of missed appointments and surgeries, as well as to repair vehicles, facilities and equipment damaged during the strike.

STISSS General Secretary Jaime Ávalos stated during a celebration rally on 9 Nov that, "for the first time in the history of the ISSS, we have reached an agreement that will generate labor harmony." Also, he asked forgiveness of all ISSS patients for the inconveniences they suffered.

### **Free Trade Agreement Talks with Taiwan**

President Antonio Saca took a four-day business trip to Taiwan to discuss plans for a free trade agreement between the two nations as well as the possibility of opening a technological park in El Salvador.

Originally, Saca was scheduled to sign the free trade agreement between the two countries, but that was postponed due to some factors related to El Salvador's sugar export quotas. Saca felt that the export quotas requested by Taiwan would have affected job opportunities and agricultural production in El Salvador. Taiwan agreed to import 35,000 metric tons of sugar from El Salvador the first year, and to raise quotas for the next three years.

The two nations did agree to continue discussing the matter and both signed an agreement committing them to a final round of discussions and ultimately the signing of the ROC-El Salvador-free trade agreement. President Chen Shui-bian expressed hopes that the two countries would be able to sign the free trade agreement soon so that it could take effect by Jan '07.

Also, President Saca would like to form stronger relations with successful Asian nations such as Taiwan, Japan and China. The administration hopes to promote trade, investment and technology in El Salvador as well as attract new businesses. Among his aspirations for the advancement of his nation are the opening of a free trade zone in Comalapa, near the international airport, to manufacture goods and technology that would be exported to the US. El Salvador's new Free Trade Agreement with the US, in addition to its proximity to the US, make it an appealing place for Asian investors.

—Stephanie Luckam