

MESOAMERICA

Volume 26, Number 9, September 2007



EL SALVADOR

Environmental Conflicts Analyzed

The Salvadoran Center for Appropriate Technology (CESTA) and diverse community organizations held the first annual Environmental Forum on 27 Aug, covering topics such as urban development in forested areas, the contamination of natural resources by industrial companies and the construction of dams.

The goal of the Forum was to raise public awareness about environmental issues, to inform the communities threatened by projects that affect the environment, and to convince them of the necessity to unite forces to protect the ecosystem.

CESTA's president, Ricardo Navarro, explained the vulnerability of the Bajo de Lempa area in the northern region of the country, where mega projects are being developed on 6% of the territory. These include 37 areas of metallic mining exploration by 15 different licensed companies from the US and Canada.

In addition, the Lempa, Jiboa, and El Sapo rivers are threatened by the planned construction of 13 hydroelectric dams.

The Forum also included discussion about planned projects in La Libertad, near the capital, where urban development is destroying nearby forests, an important natural resource.

As a result, community organizations and CESTA are demanding that the government work towards policies that will contribute to the protection of the environment and not approve the destructive projects currently being planned.

National Police under Scrutiny

FMLN Seeks Independence for Internal Affairs. The presumed presence of a clandestine group of four hit-men within the National Civil Police (PNC) and claims of abuse by police agents has generated a debate about the idea of allowing the Department of Internal Affairs to have more independence in its investigations.

The Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) requested, on 23 Aug, a reform of Article 26 of the police law in order to improve the efficiency of Internal Affairs, which according to Benito

Lara, a legislator of the left-wing party, does not have the legal support necessary to carry out its duties.

“The inspector of Internal Affairs has said that they were unable to investigate some cases due to the lack of personnel,” said Lara, adding that the important role of this independent entity is to conduct needed internal investigations.

Behind this motion, according to spokespersons for the Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA), is a political maneuver by the FMLN to drag down the work of the PNC as an institution. “This is a maneuver of the FMLN that seeks to discredit the work of the PNC,” accused ARENA legislator Wilfredo Iraheta Sanabria.

The nation’s president, Antonio Saca, revealed on 23 Aug that he and the Minister of Public Security and Justice, René Figueroa, will analyze the future of the PNC’s Internal Affairs office.

The PNC was created as a result of the Chapultepec Accords in ’92 at the end of the civil war, when the paramilitary police were disbanded and the PNC was formed by recruiting former military soldiers and FMLN guerrilla fighters (Vol. 11, No. 4).

Independent Investigation of PNC Requested. In addition to FMLN motions to give independence to the Internal Affairs office, the General Attorney for the Defense of Human Rights (PDDH), Oscar Luna, is asking for the creation of an external commission to investigate in-depth what is happening within the police structure.

“We are going to formally propose the integration of an outside commission so that we work to investigate the interior of the police organization,” said Luna, who assured that the measure has become an urgent matter due to an increase in the level of institutional risk and the danger of creating an impression of national insecurity.

Luna clearly stated that, although the country has not yet reached a state of national insecurity, he warned that it is on the edge of falling into that situation.

The proposed commission would be the responsibility of the Ministry of Public Security with the idea that the entity be made up of people not affiliated with the police. “The commission can be integrated by people from an NGO, churches, political parties or universities so that it can conduct a deep investigation into the situation,” explained Luna.

Permanent Audit of the PNC. PNC director Rodrigo Ávila affirmed that “the institution is being audited permanently and this is not a secret.”

The director made this statement on 23 Aug after the FMLN asked on 22 Aug for an “exhaustive” audit of the PNC by the General Accountability Office (GAO), with the goal of better optimizing its resources. The president of the GAO said he could not remember when they had done the previous audit of the PNC, but he assured that there had been one.

Ávila, in contrast, said: “We are transparent and consent to the permanent audit that different organizations perform such as the GAO, the Police Ethics Council and the Ministry of Finance; we are always under a magnifying glass.”

The director added that the institution is very efficient with the 97.8% of the budget dedicated specifically for salaries.

President Confirms Quiet Investigation. President Sacca confirmed on 21 Aug that the PNC is under a secret investigation for allowing human trafficking directed by a Chinese mafia. “We have been investigating this for many months. This is an investigation that cannot be conducted publicly because it would cause it to fall through,” asserted Sacca.

Sacca did not respond to questions about how long the investigation has been taking place and only explained that René Figueroa will bring the investigation to light when it is finished.

Possible Discipline Law for PNC. On 3 Sep, the Minister of Public Security and Justice, René Figueroa, presented the Disciplinary Law for the PNC to the Legislative Assembly that has the objective of being more drastic and effective in the application of sanctions against bad elements within the PNC.

Figueroa announced that he had been working on this legal document for several months in order to improve the police department. “Within the existing rules and regulations exists a chapter that is dedicated to the disciplinary system; we have wanted to be more thorough, so we have prepared the Disciplinary Law, which will help with a modern, legal tool that has precedence, quickness, agility and defines minor, serious and very serious offenses,” explained Figueroa. In addition, this legal document establishes the procedures needed to “remove a bad police officer.”

The minister reported that justice officials are continuing to investigate a gang of police officers who participated in a series of homicides in the departments La Unión and San Miguel, clarifying that at this moment they have discarded the idea of an organized crime structure involving PNC officials and civilians.

One of the results of this investigation was the discovery of a few bad police officers within the PNC’s investigative division, but “we aren’t going to tolerate impunity or let them take justice into their own hands; and we don’t want these bad officers to tarnish the reputation of the other 16,000 PNC agents,” explained Figueroa.

Taiwan President Brings More Investment

President Chen Shui-ban of Taiwan visited El Salvador on 27 Aug during a Central American tour in order to support the presidency of Elías Antonio Sacca and to participate in the inauguration of the new Department of Transportation building.

“El Salvador has progressed in the last few years and these successes have placed this country on the list of countries with continuous development,” said the Taiwanese president.

In addition, President Shui-bian donated 500 motorcycles, which are valued at \$110 million and will be distributed among various police jurisdictions. He also announced that Taiwan’s private sector has decided to invest about \$25 million to construct the fifth stage of an industrial park dedicated to textile production.

“In this country we can count on quality products from Taiwan, such as the motorcycles that we received today, which without a doubt will be a great help to the police,” stated PNC Director Rodrigo Ávila.

President Saca remarked: “We as Salvadorans hold in high esteem the close cooperation of a friendly nation such as Taiwan, especially when it includes a contribution to our national security system.” He emphasized that both nations share human values that have allowed them to come out ahead against adversity, because the people possess a strong desire and love for freedom.

—*Christina Patchett*