

# MESOAMERICA

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## GUATEMALA

### **Hospital Strike Ends**

On 27 July, doctors ended a 48-day partial work stoppage after the government agreed to increase the Health Ministry's annual budget to \$495.81 million, which is 13.5% of GDP (an increase of \$131.86 million or 5% of GDP), and to purchase much needed medical equipment and supplies. As part of the agreement the government will send an initiative to Congress for an \$11.42 million exception to the Purchase and Hiring Law. The legal exception is necessary in order for the government to purchase new medical equipment and supplies.

The work load of each doctor will increase by 15% at San Juan de Dios Hospital in Guatemala City in order to reduce waiting lists and return to normal operations. The director of Roosevelt Hospital, also in Guatemala City, believes they will be back to normal in one month. At both hospitals, doctors will attend to 1,600 patients a day, giving priority to patients with the longest-standing appointments.

The representative for doctors at San Juan de Dios Hospital stated: "this does not end here; we will make sure that the terms of the agreement are fulfilled. Each day we will be reviewing what the authorities are doing and, if they fail to fulfill their promises, we will resume the work stoppage." Other doctors assured that if the government has not fulfilled its promise to purchase adequate medical supplies within 15 days, they will resume the strike. As part of the agreement, the Office of the Human Rights Ombudsman is invited to verify compliance with the agreement and to attend further negotiations regarding the purchase of medical supplies.

At 18 of the 44 public hospitals doctors had refused all external consultations in order to protest a lack of supplies. On 19 July, the Advocate General of Human Rights (PDH) inspected all 44 public hospitals and found them inadequately supplied. Medical advisor to the PDH César Augusto Darce explained: "the physician does not have what is needed to work. In intensive care there are no monitors, they lack respirators and the equipment is damaged."

Other problems include obsolete and broken equipment and rusty surgical instruments and operating tables. Jalapa National Hospital, in southeastern Guatemala, has a 30-year old x-ray machine and a broken x-ray machine that has been unusable for two years. Creative doctors at Escuintla National Hospital, in southern Guatemala, repaired a ventilator with adhesive tape. The equipment used to sanitize surgical instruments is inadequate or absent; tiles are falling off the walls in some surgical rooms; and most hospitals are in need of surgical gloves, EKG machines and protective goggles.

With increased funds, the Health Ministry has pledged to improve working conditions for doctors and medical care for patients.

### **Plans to Fight Child Undernourishment and HIV/AIDS**

*Undernourishment.* Secretary of Food Safety and Nutrition Andrés Botrán presented a plan to the international community to reduce child malnutrition by 50% in Guatemala. The plan gives priority to the 83 municipalities that have the highest levels of poverty.

At a cost of nine cents a day per person, the objectives include educating families about the best methods to feed and nourish their children in accordance with the families' customs. The plan includes prenatal education because child malnutrition begins when a mother is undernourished during pregnancy.

According to the UN World Food Program (PMA), Guatemala has the highest level of child undernourishment in Central America with 49% of children under five malnourished. The next two countries are Honduras at 29% and Nicaragua at 20%. Undersecretary of Food Safety Carmen Mejicanos stated, "undernourishment is an invisible problem because the child does not present symptoms of hunger, but the damage to physical and mental abilities are irreversible."

*HIV/AIDS.* On 14 July, the Health Ministry introduced its *National Strategic Plan for the Prevention, Attention and Control of Sexually Transmitted Diseases and HIV/AIDS* for the years '06 to '10. The plan includes integrated medical care, measures to improve the living conditions of infected persons and to reduce discrimination, an epidemiological supervision plan, a permanent statistical evaluation program and prevention through education. Additionally, it will focus efforts towards the most vulnerable groups, such as male and female sex workers, their clients and homosexuals.

The Health Ministry hopes to decrease the appearance of new cases to 5% by '10. Health Minister Marco Tulio Sosa believes it was important that all sectors of society were included in the creation of the plan.

Since the first confirmed HIV case in '84, Guatemala has confirmed 9,199 new cases of the virus and 1,010 deaths of persons between the ages of 20 and 34. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the adult prevalence rate in Guatemala is 1.10% with 78,000 people between the ages of 15 and 49 living with the disease ('03 statistics). However, the number of HIV/AIDS infections in Latin America and the Caribbean are on the rise.

According to the WHO, the number of HIV/AIDS infections in the region will increase from 2 million to 3.5 million by the year '15. In a *Science Magazine* report, epidemiologist and head of the Joint United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) Peter Piot states, "when I look at Latin America, I think Central America is the most vulnerable for the spread of HIV." Author Jon Cohen named widespread poverty, economic inequality, massive migration, weak leadership, homophobia and scarcity of resources as some of the main reasons for Central America's vulnerability.

### **Crime Bill Becomes the Law**

In light of an increase in violent crimes and denunciations by the European Association for the Protection of Human Rights (AEDH) and by the Center for the Investigation, Study and Promotion of Human Rights (CIEPRODEH), the Guatemalan legislature passed a law to fight organized crime

on 19 July. Out of 158 legislators, 105 voted to approve the implementation of wiretapping and the use of undercover agents and security forces to infiltrate organized crime groups.

Article 20, the deployment of undercover agents, was one of the most controversial components and sparked strong debate about who could authorize their use. The ruling Grand National Alliance Party (GANA) argued that authorization should be in the hands of the general prosecutor. On the other hand, members of the Patriotic Party (PP) and the National Unity of Hope party (UNE) wanted a judge to grant authorization. However, GANA won the argument because a judge's authorization is published and could place the lives of agents in danger.

Other components of the law include a 50-year prison sentence for members of drug trafficking groups and the crime of illicit association in instances of car robbery, money laundering, murder and genocide.

Despite the combined efforts of the Civilian National Police (PNC) and 2,092 former soldiers who were mobilized in Mar '06 to assist the PNC in controlling crime (Vol. 25, No. 3), violent deaths and other crime rates increased in May and June '06 in comparison to '05. Total violent acts increased by 52 to a level of 499: 40% were attributed to fights between gangs, 30% to organized crime and drug trafficking, 25% were undetermined, and 5% were crimes of passion. The government has promised to invest \$21.1 million to combat delinquency between July and Dec.

Prior to the passage of the crime law, the AEDH criticized the Guatemalan government for being deceitful. They believe the government invited the Inter-American Human Rights Commission (CIDH) to Guatemala in an attempt to conceal the grave situation of human rights violations. The Council of Ethnic Communities, AEDH and CIEPRODEH are alarmed by the remilitarization of society, recurrent public insecurity and high rates of organized violence.

### **Economic Indicators**

*Growth.* On 24 July, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) presented its most recent economic analysis of the region. Guatemala recorded its best economic recovery of the past five years with an economic growth rate of 3.2% between June '05 and June '06. Executive secretary of ECLAC José Luis Machinea explained that the economic growth came from an increase in private consumption.

For '06, the Bank of Guatemala predicts an economic growth rate of 4.4%, an inflation rate of 5-7% and a deficit of 2.5% in GDP.

*Remittances.* An analysis by the Guatemalan firm Copades noted a 2% increase in remittances from Guatemalans living in the US since '05. Remittances represent 11.3% of Guatemalan GDP (3.3% of GDP in '01); total over \$3 billion; and enable more construction, business investment and private consumption.

Copades found that economic growth depends on the flow of remittances, which contribute 13.8% to the nation's consumption and investment capacity and equal \$286.8 million per month, \$9.5 million per day, \$398,300 per hour and \$6,639 per minute; 13.6% of the money spent daily in Guatemala comes from remittances.

La Curacao Business Center in Los Angeles, California, and G&T Continental Bank in Guatemala formalized an agreement to make it easier for Guatemalans living in the US to transfer money into

G&T bank accounts. According to the International Organization for Migration (OIM), more than 1.2 million Guatemalans live in the US, equivalent to 10% of Guatemala's current population. Additionally, 36.3% of Guatemalans in the US live in Los Angeles.

*Informal Jobs.* Out of an economically active population (employed and unemployed above age seven) of five million people, only one million registered with the Guatemalan Institute of Social Security (IGSS) in '05, meaning eight out of every ten jobs are informal. Informal sector jobs are characterized by poor working conditions, no benefits and no governmental regulation. They could consist of casual jobs, temporary jobs, unpaid jobs, subsistence agriculture, multiple job holding, unofficial activities or underground activities.

Every year 150,000 people enter the labor market, yet only 15,000 register with the IGSS. According to Luis Felipe Linares of the Association for Research and Social Studies (ASIES), "It is necessary to create 200,000 formal sector jobs each year in order to absorb the workforce." Labor Minister Jorge Gallardo Flores argues that the government has created 300,000 jobs in the past year. Linares agrees, but points out that most of these jobs are temporary positions to repair damages caused by Hurricane Stan.

—*Kimberly Silvi*