

MESOAMERICA

Volume 24, Number 2, February 2005



HONDURAS

25,000 Farmers to Lose Their Land

The 16 private banks and four financial cooperatives that operate in Honduras announced on 31 Jan that they would be forced to foreclose on as many as 25,000 mortgages. The vast majority of those in danger of losing their property are farmers or ranchers who have been unable to pay off a part or all of their mortgages during the past six years. The farmers called upon the government to intervene on their behalf to avoid a crisis, saying that the foreclosures are unjust, citing interest rates that range between 22% and 34% as being nearly impossible for the average farmer to pay off. In total, the amount owed to the banks is nearly \$211 million.

José Chanón, executive director of the National Federation of Farmers and Ranchers of Honduras (FENAGH), announced that talks with the government and bankers are ongoing, but that the proposals for resolving the agricultural crisis are still “nearly 100% on paper.” FENAGH spokesmen pointed to Hurricane Mitch, which caused widespread devastation in '98, as the event that triggered the majority of the problems. Ranchers lost about 700,000 head of cattle to the hurricane and much of the country's farmland was damaged. The hurricane also destroyed 80% of the country's infrastructure, much of which is still in disrepair. In all, Hurricane Mitch caused about \$6.5 billion worth of economic damages in Honduras.

Despite large amounts of international aid to help Mitch victims, farmers and ranchers were still forced to sell most of their remaining cattle or farming equipment in the years following the disaster in order to survive and pay off loans. The government tried to help the beleaguered farmers from '99 to '02 by pardoning more than 60% of their debt, but the effort seems to have failed for the majority of farmers. Stating the severity of the problem of FENAGH members and other *campesinos*, Santiago Ruiz said: “The crisis is serious for us and, the worst of it, is we don't know what to do ... the farmers don't have access to more bank credit, and we can't restore our economy or our property.”

The financial woes of the farmers are indicative of a larger problem throughout the country. Without access to low-interest loans, technical assistance or resources, few farmers or small and medium businesses can succeed. Since Hurricane Mitch, governmental help to the public has been sluggish at best. Speaking about the lack of access to resources that most Hondurans face, Chacón underscored that “there needs to be a national plan” to get more assistance to people “and that this cannot wait.”

Military Sends Mine Disposal Experts to Surinam

Sixteen members of a Honduran mine clearing unit traveled to the former Dutch colony of Surinam in Feb to help diffuse mines and other explosives left over after the civil war, which was waged during the '80s. Surinam's Foreign Minister, Nalini Sewpersad Singh, told journalists that the 45-day mission was coordinated and funded by the Organization of American States' (OAS) anti-mine program. According to Sewpersad Singh, the unit's goal in the South American country is to provide technical training and to oversee the disposal of anti-personal mines in the northeastern sector of the country, known as Stolkertsijver. The cost of the mission to the OAS is \$120,000; all of the equipment used by the Honduran military will be donated to the military of Surinam for further use in deactivating mines.

Plan Super Heavy Hand: More Penal Reforms

In what is seen as sharp retaliation against gang delinquency, Honduran lawmakers stiffened their previous hardliner anti-gang legislation with more penal reforms designed to eliminate gang activity. Gang members or *mareros* will now be subject to jail sentences of between 20 and 30 years, and face fines of between \$5,550 and \$16,660, just for belonging to a gang. The new legislation comes in reaction to increasing violence that has accompanied gang activity, specifically the 23 Dec massacre of 28 civilians aboard a commuter bus by members of the gang "Mara Salvatrucha" (MS).

Aside from increased sentences, the penal reforms also eliminate the possibility for presumed gang-members to receive bail if they are charged with a crime. Conversely, civilians will automatically receive bail if they kill a gang member while acting in self-defense or while protecting their family or property. Honduran legislatures also have discussed implementing a new law that would assign imprisoned gang members to forced labor, as well as the construction of a \$1 million prison to hold gang members. These latest penal reforms replace the previous anti-gang legislation, implemented in '03, known as *mano duro* or "heavy hand," which penalized gang member with nine to 12-year prison sentences. However, violent gang activity has continued to increase, and it remains to be seen if simply handing out long prison terms to gang members is an effective policy.

With stricter sentencing guidelines meaning an influx of detainees, one of the poorest countries in the Western Hemisphere is being forced to invest more and more money into the maintenance of its abysmal penitentiary system. Since the implementation of zero tolerance gang policies, Honduran prisons have from experienced severe overcrowding, which has accelerated their rundown condition. Further, to prevent future prison disasters like the May '04 prison fire in San Pedro Sula, in which 104 inmates burned to death (Vol. 23 No. 6), the government will spend \$10 million in prison repairs this year alone. Meanwhile, President Ricardo Maduro has taken steps to upgrade other parts of the system, including the construction of 72 new maximum-security cells within the National Penitentiary of Támara, designed to hold the country's most dangerous individuals.

Reports indicate that some 100,000 members of the rival gangs MS and Mara 18 now reside in Honduras, and during the past years violence surrounding them has caused considerable public uneasiness. Current president of Congress and National Party (PN) presidential hopeful Porfirio Lobo Sosa believes that "only with the death penalty can we achieve the tranquility that we desire"; he has made reinstating capital punishment a centerpiece of his "Work and Security" campaign for the PN

presidential nomination. In an effort to bring the issue to voters and hold a referendum on the death penalty, Lobo Sosa petitioned Maduro to denounce several international treaties that prohibit Honduras from reinstalling capital punishment. Maduro rejected Lobo Sosa's request on the basis of "moral reasons."

Central American Presidents Unite

Presidents from all seven Central American countries convened for a one-day conference hosted by President Maduro in Tegucigalpa. The agenda consisted of reaffirming the region's commitment to CAFTA, and the signing of a declaration aimed at taking measures to further integrate the isthmus. The meeting was administered under the Central American Integration System (SICA), a regional organization founded in '91.

The heads of state remain committed to passing the free trade agreement with the US, and hope that between Mar and Apr the entire region will have ratified CAFTA. As for promoting regional integration, the presidents agreed to create a special commission to study the logistics of creating a unified Central American passport and to continue dialogue regarding the creation of a unified customs system.

Other items discussed at the meeting included creating a regional anti-drug trafficking agency and implementing common policies concerning the sale, possession, and transport of firearms in each country.

—Andrew Kraushaar and Corey Schott