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NICARAGUA

Crisis Ends, Legislative Assembly Leaders Elected

After more than a week of failed negotiations, the nation's legislators elected the new directorate of the Legislative Assembly, putting an end to a crisis that had frozen the lawmaking branch of the nation's government for nearly 10 days. On 17 Jan, Eduardo Gómez López of the Alliance for the Republic (APRE) party was unanimously elected president of the Legislative Assembly, which will now be able to return to business as usual.

The assembly's decision comes after seven failed attempts to reach a consensus among lawmakers. Since 9 Jan, the legislature had been stalled completely, because without a directorate, no bills or laws could be presented to Congress. Also elected as the directorate's leadership were René Nuñez of the Sandinista National Liberation Front as first vice president, Guillermo Osorno of the Christian Path as second vice president, and Orlando Tardencilla of the APRE as third vice president.

Liberal Constitutionalist Party (PLC) member María Auxiliadora Alemán was elected first secretary of the legislature, PLC member Eduardo Mena was elected as second secretary, and Sandinista José Figueroa was elected as third secretary.

Critics view these elections as a significant loss for President Enrique Bolaños who campaigned hard for several PLC legislators to take the top post. In the end, though, it was Gómez López who won all 91 votes and who will be working alongside Bolaños in one of the most important posts in the government. The politician says he plans to "legislate for the good of Nicaragua," and pointed to a host of new economic, social and security laws that are all ready to be brought before the legislature.

Public Schools Take "Radical" Approach to Fight AIDS

The Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports (MECD) has taken a major step forward in the nation's effort to curb the spread of HIV-AIDS by announcing last month that sexual education will be incorporated into its public school curriculums. The plan, which has included the training and certification of hundreds of AIDS counselors throughout the country, has come under harsh criticism from the Catholic Church. Nevertheless, the MECD took advantage of the celebration of World AIDS Day and announced its decision, calling for a "more radical" approach in the fight against the disease.

Since the first confirmed case in '87, 1,914 Nicaraguans have been diagnosed with HIV, nearly half of which have been detected within the last four years. The actual number of cases is estimated at around 6,200 to include those that go unreported. The MECD is worried that, if left unchecked, by '16 the statistics could reach proportions similar to those experienced by some African nations.

MECD Minister Miguel Ángel Garcia said that it is now time to bring the discussion into the classrooms. "It is not about working against moral and religious viewpoints ... but rather the fact that we need to transmit the necessary information [to the students] without being puritan."

The Catholic Church, however, sees things differently. "We do not agree with bringing in truckloads of condoms and passing them out," said Monsignor Jorge Solórzano, bishop of Matagalpa. "For us, it is a question of values that they teach kids abstinence and respect of other people.... In countries where the use of condoms has been promoted, there has been greater promiscuity and, what's more, the kids are deceived because the condom does not protect them 100%. They are lying to the people and promoting more promiscuity."

The MECD has asserted that it will not overlook values in its program. "In this education, we are going to emphasize the formation of values because, as the Ministry, we believe that the best protection that a person can have is the capacity to identify risk factors and say 'no,'" said Rodrigo Álvarez, director of the Program of Education for Life within the MECD. "One cannot avoid the reality that 30% of students are sexually active by 11th grade. It is urgent that they be given all of the information available about the ways to protect themselves."

On 1 Dec, the MECD graduated 573 school and family counselors for the prevention of an AIDS epidemic in the country. The counselors will work at various schools throughout Nicaragua, promoting awareness of the disease and methods of protection and testing, as well as providing counseling to students and families affected by the disease.

Since '87, 557 people have died of AIDS-related diseases here. Currently, 28% of the HIV-positive cases in Nicaragua are women, the majority of whom are housewives infected by their husbands. The virus has taken the lives of 25 million people across the world.

Nicanor: Grand Polluter of Great Lake

Lake Nicaragua is under the threat of a relatively new silent killer: tilapia. The cultivation of this freshwater fish is one of the biggest polluters in the lake and the authorization given to the company Nicanor (Mares Nica Noruega S.A.) to farm tilapia was given illegally, according to environmental groups trying fiercely to protect the future of Central America's largest lake.

While tilapia filets have been well received in international markets, and especially in the US, their cultivation in natural bodies of water is ecologically very costly. Ecuador and Brazil are two of Latin America's main exporters of tilapia and both countries cultivate the fish in man-made ponds in order to curb environmental contamination. When a farming project is carried out in a natural body of water, however, proper filtering systems must be put in place to clean out the fish's waste and uneaten food that accumulates on the lake's floor. According to ecologist David Ríos, if Nicanor does not implement such a filtering system, Lake Nicaragua will suffer irreparable damage.

"Each tilapia is given 6% of its weight in food every day. This means that for a million pounds of fish we are talking about 60,000 pounds of fish food, which results in a huge amount of waste being

deposited into the water of Lake Nicaragua on a daily basis,” said Ríos. He estimates that upwards of 18 million pounds of this kind of waste are deposited into the lake every month.

Nicanor received authorization for the hugely profitable tilapia project from the government of ex-president and convicted felon Arnoldo Alemán, who overlooked a law prohibiting the use of a protected area like the company’s site on Ometepe Island, located in the middle of the lake, for agro-industrial projects. Since then, efforts to reverse this decision, or at least call attention to it, have fallen on deaf ears within the government, mostly due to the fact that at the time of project’s conception Nicanor’s managing director was Patrick Bolaños, the nephew of the current president, Enrique Bolaños.

Lake Nicaragua is soon to become a source of potable water for surrounding cities such as Managua and Granada and its protection is more important than ever. The local governments of the surrounding municipalities have stepped up their efforts to stop Nicanor’s contamination of Lake Nicaragua. However, they face an uphill battle. As Salvador Montenegro, director of the Center for Research in Aquatic Resources, pointed out: “the country, although it admits that the most important aquatic resource is Lake Nicaragua, which finds itself in a process of degradation, it does not have the foresight in order for its adequate protection nor will it recognize that it has been an error to authorize the operation of a business as contaminating as Nicanor.”

WHO Recognition for Measles Vaccination Campaign

Nicaragua is celebrating its recognition as an “international example” by the World Health Organization after its completion of a nationwide German Measles vaccination campaign which has brought the country close to being able to declare it “eradicated” of the disease (see Vol. 24, No. 11). The Health Ministry officially ended the campaign on 1 Dec after vaccinating 3,754,464 Nicaraguans in two months.

—*Ian McLoone*