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NICARAGUA

First Venezuelan Oil Shipment Arrives

The much-anticipated and controversial first shipment of Sandinista-brokered Venezuelan diesel arrived at Nicaragua's Caribbean port of El Rama on 7 Oct, with the touted goal of easing this country's grinding energy crisis one month before the hotly contested presidential elections.

Yet several days after its arrival, the relatively small shipment of 80,000 gallons of diesel had not yet been unloaded from the hold of the tanker, and was still without a buyer.

The shipment is part of favorable-term petroleum deal negotiated between the Venezuelan state oil company PDVSA and the Sandinista-controlled Association of Municipal Mayors (AMUNIC), headed by Dionisio Marengo, the Sandinista mayor of Managua. The diesel is to be distributed by a joint Venezuelan-Nicaraguan company called Albanic.

The shipment originally was intended to help alleviate the fuel costs of several bus cooperatives in Managua. But that plan was scrapped when leaders of the transportation sector argued that the amount of diesel was insufficient to meet the needs of all the fleets, and would create unfair competition if used to help some cooperatives and not others.

Marengo then announced that the diesel would go to the state-owned Las Brisas power plant to help generate electricity to alleviate the daily power-rationing blackouts here. But that plan also appears to be in limbo. Frank Kelly, president of the Nicaraguan Electrical Company (ENEL), said that Marengo had offered to sell the diesel to ENEL for energy production, but said there are "lots of factors" still pending on any sale, such as quality testing. The amount of diesel on the ship reportedly is only enough to power Las Brisas for 24 hours.

"The problem with the energy crisis here is not about petroleum; it has to do with the country's productive capacity for power," Kelly said.

Alejandro Granado, the Venezuelan president of Albanic, claims that Venezuela will send another 12 million gallons of bunker fuel in the coming weeks, also scheduled to arrive before the elections.

That promise has some worried that the Sandinista candidate Daniel Ortega will cash-in Hugo Chavez' chips for votes in the upcoming elections. Presidential candidate Edmundo Jarquín of the Sandinista Renovation Movement (MRS) went as far as to send a letter to Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez to ask him not to interfere in the Nicaraguan electoral process.

Others, however, welcome any efforts to solve the country's power crisis—something the current government has not done in the last five years.

Give Peace a Chance

In an unannounced move that raised eyebrows and spite among his alleged allies, former *contra* leader Salvador Talavera, president of the Nicaraguan Resistance Party (PRN), on 15 Sep signed an historic peace accord with former enemy Daniel Ortega of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN).

The accord, signed as part of the Sandinista's national-reconciliation campaign, drew harsh criticism from supporters of Nicaraguan Liberal Alliance (ALN) candidate Eduardo Montealegre, with whom Talavera has signed an electoral alliance in exchange for a coveted candidacy spot on the ballot for the National Assembly.

The appearance of Talavera and Ortega holding hands together sparked the Liberal Constitutional Party (PLC) to allege that the two had a secret pact, and that Ortega had sent Talavera on a mission to infiltrate the ranks of the ALN. PLC vice-presidential candidate José Antonio Alvarado went as far as to say that a vote for the ALN is a vote for the FSLN.

Other former *contra* leaders allied with Montealegre, such as Oscar Sobalvarro (Comandante Rubén), called Talavera a "traitor" and insisted that they were the new leaders of the PRN.

Talavera, however, claims he has no intention of giving up his candidacy spot. "I have won this [candidacy] with lots of sacrifice and blood, and I don't owe it to anyone except my people," he said. "I am not interested in what happens within the ALN; I am interested in my own party."

Talavera said "100%" of the 200,000-plus PRN supporters will vote for ALN candidates for the National Assembly, thereby assuring his election to that body. But he wouldn't make the same pledge of support for the party's presidential candidate, Montealegre.

Talavera said that the peace accord with Ortega was signed now to eliminate the fear factor from the elections, and to disable some candidates' claims that war would resume if Ortega were to be reelected.

"These heroes of democracy are being used; they say that if [Ortega wins] we are ready to return to the mountains," Talavera said.

The stated objective of the peace accords, according to its preamble, is to "contribute to the consolidation of peace and to achieve economic development, in a framework of equality and solidarity, with the most impoverished sectors of our country."

Most importantly, Talavera says, the accord promises peace, regardless of who wins the elections. “We promise that never again will the Nicaraguan family resort to violent methods to resolve their differences, assuring that there will never again be war, nor obligatory military service, nor confiscations, nor rationing cards, and that never again will we be subjected to any foreign influence that leads us to armed confrontation among Nicaraguan brothers,” reads Article 1 of the peace accord.

Deadly Brew

Healthcare authorities, police, politicians, the private sector and international organizations all rallied to offer assistance to a “health emergency” in Nicaragua caused by poisoned moonshine, which claimed the lives of some 44 Nicaraguans and hospitalized some 340 more during Sep.

The victims, mostly residents in the northern department of León, reportedly thought they were drinking a popular moonshine made of sugarcane (*guarón*, as it’s known here), but in fact they were drinking a lethal combination of methanol (wood alcohol) mixed with water, according to the Health Ministry.

Several suspects were arrested for distributing this lethal moonshine. The combination, when consumed in large quantities, results in death, destroying the victim’s brain, intestines and liver. Those who consumed smaller doses complained of strong headaches, blurred vision, stomach pains and temporary paralysis.

The Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) provided about 300 antidotes to treat people poisoned by the methanol, following the ministry’s declaration of a health emergency on 7 Sep.

Authorities prohibited the sale, distribution and consumption of homemade liquor in León, and even handed out bottled liquor to drunks.

The health emergency covered the municipalities of Achuapa, El Jicaral, El Sauce, Larreynaga-Malpaisillo, La Paz Centro, León, Nagarote, Quezalguaque, Santa Rosa del Peñón and Telica, all in León province.

Oldie But Goodie: Inter-oceanic Canal Project

During opening remarks to the VII Conference of Defense Ministers of the Americas, celebrated 2-6 Oct in Managua, Nicaraguan President Enrique Bolaños pitched an aging, yet still undeveloped, \$18-26 billion plan to build an inter-oceanic canal across Nicaragua.

“The galloping increase in world businesses demands another canal in addition to a widened Panama Canal,” Bolaños said, referring to the 22 Oct referendum in Panama to widen that country’s canal, which has been operational for almost a century.

Plans for building an inter-oceanic canal in Nicaragua have been tossed around for the last 400 years. The so-called “Gran Canal” touted by Bolaños is one of four canal projects approved by the legislature to conduct feasibility studies in Nicaragua. It is also the least advanced, most expensive and most grandiose of the four proposed projects.

Boosters of the Gran Canal project claim construction of the 280-km canal would create 40,000 direct jobs and 200,000 indirect jobs.

Another proposed canal project, the CINN dry canal, reportedly is the most advanced of the four canal plans. Supporters of the CINN project, however, have been throwing their hands up in frustration with Nicaragua for more than a year, claiming that feet-dragging by the Bolaños administration has kept the project from moving forward.

—*Tim Rogers*