

# *MESOAMERICA*

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## **PANAMA**

### **Bridge Development Reopens Weapons Clean-Up Issue**

On 15 Aug '04, the Centennial Bridge, which crosses the Panama Canal, opened on the 90th anniversary of the first ship that passed through the canal—the US cargo ship Ancon. In recent months, developers have shown interest in building residential and commercial areas near the bridge, however, problems are in store for developers. The future development projects have stepped on a delicate subject of responsibility: who should clean up the former US-weapons testing grounds?

Panamanian officials are concerned that unexploded materiel pose a dangerous threat to “unsuspecting motorists who wander off the roadway” and to the “residents of the low-income housing units that are expected to be constructed near the new bridge and access roads.”

Some 37,000 acres are believed to contain unexploded materiel, but this is not the only concern for future residents. According to John Lindsay-Poland, author of *Walking Away from Panama: The US Legacy in Panama*, the US conducted a very active chemical weapons-testing program from '30 until at least '69, where everything from mustard gas and sarin nerve gas to Agent Orange and VX nerve agent were tested (Vol. 19, No. 3).

Information regarding the amount and location of chemical testing in Panama remains unavailable. According to a study by the Fellowship of Reconciliation and testimony from ranking US Army officials, “most of these chemical agents are now feared to be improperly disposed of on the former testing grounds.” Although some records show that small amounts of leftover VX nerve agent were returned, no shipping records have been found to confirm the location of the excess VX landmines, which are now “presumed to still litter the abandoned US testing grounds” (Vol. 19, No. 3).

In '03, the US made its “last, best offer” in regards to the clean-up, however Panama refused the agreement because the offer included a clause that freed the US from responsibility if and when additional weaponry were found.

The administration of President Martín Torrijos has not pursued the issue with the US; analysts believe this is because of the bilateral free trade agreement the two nations are currently negotiating. The official

position of the US has been that they “cleaned up the area in so far as it may be practicable” (Vol. 19, No. 3).

### **Association of Caribbean States Summit**

On the 28 and 29 July, the 4<sup>th</sup> Summit of the Association of Caribbean States (ACS) was held in Panama City. The summit brought top officials from 25 member states, including the presidents of Honduras, Colombia, Mexico, the Dominican Republic, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Belize, Trinidad-Tobago, Jamaica and Haiti. The agenda covered a wide range of topics including: AIDS, transportation, tourism, poverty, development and multilateral cooperation.

On 29 July, the ACS approved and signed the Panama Declaration, an extensive document calling for renewed efforts for multilateral cooperation. The Declaration also vows to fight “coercive economic measures,” and encourages “support for greater representation of developing countries on the UN Security Council.” The document asks for the end of extraterritorial laws, such as the Helms-Burton Act, indicating that the law, like others, “undermines the principles of international laws and the UN Charter.”

On the urging of the Cuban delegation, there was a special addition to the document: “We once again call on the government of the United States of America to put an end to such measures, according to the 13 resolutions titled ‘Need to end the economic, commercial and financial blockaded imposed by the United States of America against Cuba’ approved by the UN General Assembly.”

The ACS is comprised of 25 member nations, including the 14 nations from the Caribbean Community Summit (CARICOM), the G3 Group (Colombia, Mexico and Venezuela), the six Central American countries, Cuba and the Dominican Republic. Associate members include Aruba, the Netherlands Antilles and France, who represents Martinique, French Guyana and Guadeloupe.

Representatives from observer nations were present during the summit including: Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Ecuador, Egypt, Finland, India, Italy, the Netherlands, Korea, Morocco, Peru, Russia, Spain, Turkey, Ukraine and the UK.

The ACS celebrated its 11-year anniversary in '05. The first ACS Summit was held in Trinidad-Tobago in '95, the second in the Dominican Republic in '99 and the third on the island of Margarita (Venezuela) in '01.

### **Cuba-Panama to Restore Ties**

On 29 July, Torrijos and Carlos Lage, the visiting Cuban Vice-President of the State Council, “agreed in principle” to the normalization of ties between the two nations. The decision occurred on the “sidelines” of the ACS Summit in Panama during the final days of July. Lewis said that all necessary procedures for the normalization of relations will be completed in the immediate future.

On 14 July, Panamanian Foreign Minister Samuel Lewis spoke of Torrijos’ regret for the past actions of his predecessor and of the desire to restore “full diplomatic ties” with Cuba as soon as possible. Cuba cut ties with Panama in Aug '04 after former President Mireya Moscoso pardoned Luis Posada Carriles

and three accomplices, who were jailed in Panama for a failed assassination attempt on Fidel Castro in '00 while Castro was attending the 10<sup>th</sup> Iberian-American Summit, held in Panama (Vol. 24, No. 5).

### **Government Subsidizes Tomatoes for Nestlé**

In mid-July the Nestlé Company advised Panama it would discontinue purchasing Panamanian tomatoes that are used in the company's pastes and sauces in favor of cheaper US or Chilean tomatoes at the end of the '06 harvest. The decision would directly affect 250 producers, who employ more than 10,000 people during the harvest season. Nestlé pays local producers \$5.14 per 100 lbs. of tomatoes, but could buy them from Chile or the US for \$3.50.

On 30 July, the Association of Tomato Producers (ATP) met in an emergency meeting to evaluate Nestlé's position and alternatives to postpone this "hard hit." The ATP asked President Torrijos for \$1.64 subsidy per 100 lbs. during the next four years to give growers time to switch to other agricultural products, such as melon, pineapple, squash or watermelon. On the same day, the Ministry of Agricultural Development approved an investment plan, expected to benefit 60 producers, which will provide subsidies to tomato growers who sell to Nestlé.

In Dec '03, Nestlé closed its production centers for condensed milk, but continues to purchase 56 million liters each year from local dairies.

### **TB Outbreak for Ngöbe-Buglés**

In late July it was reported that, in the province of Chiriquí, there was an epidemic of Tuberculosis (TB), with the majority of the 250 cases affecting the Ngöbe-Buglés Indigenous region. The Ministry of Health has sent a medical team to the region in an attempt to quell the outbreak with free outpatient treatment.

The regional director from the Ministry of Health reported that, although there are free tests and treatments, the disease continues to effect the population, especially because many of the Ngöbe-Buglés Indigenous people live in areas of extreme poverty, where overcrowding and malnutrition facilitate the spread of TB.

TB is an airborne disease that can be transmitted by coughing or sneezing. TB can be cured, if caught in a timely fashion, by taking appropriate medications and by approximately six months of best-rest. However, many of those afflicted with TB abandon their treatment due to the long treatment time, resulting in detrimental effects to health and increasing their resistance to future treatment.

—Catherine Golden