

MESOAMERICA

Volume 26, Number 12, December 2007



PANAMA

Doctors Demand Higher Wages

On 6 Nov, the majority of Panama's public health doctors commenced a 48-hour strike to demand higher wages and administrative changes. According to Julio Valarini, a leader of the National Medical Negotiation Commission (COMENENAL), 80% of doctors who work for the government in public health services participated in the strike.

The government made attempts to avoid the strike a week before it was planned to go into effect. According to President Martín Torrijos, who met twice with COMENENAL officials during the last week of Oct, "in no way a strike can be justified when we have said that we are willing to discuss the issue of salaries." Minister Turner also urged doctors to continue negotiations but forgo the strike, which she says primarily affects "the population who already [has] to wait so long for a medical appointment." According to the Ministry of Health (MINSAs), lost appointments will be rescheduled in '08.

Thirteen days into the strike, doctors informed government negotiators that they wanted to start "from zero" due to dissatisfaction with agreements reached thus far. Public health doctors also presented government officials with 25 points to be examined, one of which proposes the idea of two different negotiating commissions to discuss administrative issues and wages.

Part of the controversy centered on the payment of overtime, which Panamanian Health Minister Rosario Turner claimed should be paid in accordance with the organic law of the Social Security Administration and the Administrative Code. Conversely, COMENENAL affirmed that payment should be consistent with the nation's Labor Code and that working overtime should not be obligatory unless the doctors are paid for the extra hours.

The government, which considers the striking doctors' recent decision irresponsible, has decided to cease salary payments to doctors who are on strike and to provide the General Comptroller with a report on current public health employee productivity. The report will help identify those who have been working and those who have been on strike.

In response to the dire need for public medical care, Turner claimed that the Health Ministry is working "to compensate the effects of the medical strike, and to continue taking care of Panamanians

and their immediate needs.” Specialist doctors have been called in to help alleviate the ongoing health crisis.

On 14 Dec, after 38 days on strike, COMENENAL reported that its members had reached a tentative agreement with government negotiators that includes a 25% increase in doctor’s salaries, although their original demand was for a 45% salary increase. Nevertheless, it appears that a final settlement is near, if the government agrees to not seek reprisals against doctors who participated in the strike.

So far, the strike has caused the suspension of 600,000 medical appointments and more than 6,000 scheduled surgeries, while the material losses are estimated at \$11 million for the Ministry of Health and the Social Security Administration.

Growth in Tourism

According to a recent announcement by the Panamanian Institute of Tourism (IPAT), Panama expects to take over Costa Rica’s lead in the Central American tourism industry by ’09.

Panama’s confidence in the tourism sector is primarily due to its 8% economic growth in ’06 and an estimated 10% growth in ’07. These unprecedented rises can be attributed to factors such as the pending free-trade agreement with the US and the \$8 billion canal expansion project.

One source claims that Panama boasts many advantages over Costa Rica. These include an efficient banking system, reliable highways, a well-trained police force, and appealing benefits and tax breaks for foreign investors and retirees.

All of these factors, plus what another source identifies as the ideal country to “escape political or legal persecutions [and] enjoy the climate and natural beauties,” draws thousands of visitors each year.

While most visitors heed the Panamanian tourist and immigration requirements, there are always those who do not and face deportation with future restrictions to enter the country. According to a recent report from the Panamanian Immigration Office, roughly 1,200 foreigners were deported between 1 Jan and 31 Oct for lack of compliance with the minimum requirements necessary to remain in the country legally.

The Panamanian Director of Immigration and Naturalization, Clovis Sinisterra Frías, claimed that 679 foreigners were denied entry into Panama at Tocumen International Airport for similar reasons. Statistics reveal that 30% returned home due to lack of economic solvency, 25% as a result of false visas, and 19% for being considered “bad faith tourists.”

Among the nationalities commonly deported, Sinisterra claimed that Colombians top the list, followed by Chinese, Ecuadoran, Peruvian, Dominican and Dutch citizens.

Public Schools to Teach Mandarin

Panama is moving to make the teaching of Mandarin compulsory in all public schools, in recognition of China’s growing importance in the world economy.

The Panamanian National Assembly has given conditional approval to the bill in the first of three debates. The bill’s supporters say boosting the number of Chinese speakers will help increase

Panama's competitiveness. China is the biggest single user of the Panama Canal that connects the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans.

The bill's supporters recognize that English is the international language of business but say that, with China's increasing economic influence, Mandarin is set to be an indispensable language. Panama has important commercial links with China, with bilateral trade running at \$1 billion.

The proposed legislation sets out a timeframe of 10 years for Mandarin to be taught in all public schools, allowing for the immigration of specialized Chinese teachers to help train local teachers.

Panama also has diplomatic links with Taiwan, one of the few countries in Latin America to do so.

US Report: Panamanian Court Reform Urgent

Panama's court system is criticized for lacking controls to prevent corruption and for its process for selecting Supreme Court justices. A report issued on 4 Dec says that Panama's court system needs "urgent reform," and that there is a perception that the system is corrupt.

The report, produced by the Washington, DC-based Due Process of Law Foundation, is entitled, "Evaluation of Judicial Corruption in Central America and Panama and the Mechanisms to Control It." The foundation was created in '96 by Thomas Buergenthal, a judge currently serving on the International Court of Justice.

The document was based on interviews with users and operators of the judiciary as well as internal studies in Panama and in other Central American countries. However, the authors warned that the study did not constitute a comprehensive diagnosis of the court system in each of the respective countries.

Regarding the situation in Panama, the report acknowledges that steps have been taken to improve the court system but that it requires structural changes to combat corruption. The authors suggest, for example, the adopting of constitutional amendments and the establishment of a new formula for selecting Supreme Court justices. The report said that the judges should be granted "genuine autonomy and independence."

The report also examined the role of the National Assembly (Legislature), the Public Ministry (headed by the Attorney General, who is assisted by the Solicitor General, the district and municipal attorneys, and other officials designated by law), the Comptroller General (oversees government revenues and expenditures and investigates the financial operations of government bodies) and the National Transparency Council Against Corruption.

This is the second blow to Panama's judicial system during the first week of Dec.

On 3 Dec, Supreme Court Judge Graciela Dixon was soundly defeated in her bid to win a seat on the International Criminal Court. She was defeated by a candidate from Uganda, Daniel David Ntanda Nsereko, who received 78 votes to Dixon's 21.

Dixon's candidacy had been questioned by local human rights groups, which claimed she has refused to hear cases on local human rights' violations.

Darién Not Safe, Says US Agency

One day after an article was widely published in the US recommending the rain forest of Darién as an ecotourism destination and debunking a “myth” that the area is dangerous because of guerrilla activity, the US Bureau of Consular Affairs issued a bulletin stating that US citizens should not venture into this region.

The bulletin, issued 3 Dec, warns that Darién province is a region where foreign nationals and Panamanian citizens have been victims of “violent crime, kidnapping and murder,” plagued by terrorists, drug traffickers and other criminals, and lacking communications and medical infrastructure, which makes travel therein potentially hazardous.

Therefore, the US government recommends that tourists not travel to the area, not even to the Darien National Park or to privately-owned nature reserves and tourist resorts. Although Panama has received glowing reviews as a tourist destination from the international media, the US State Department has issued numerous memos warning visitors about traveling in Panama City and other areas of the country.

Moreover, in the Panama-Colombia border area the presence of Colombian guerrilla organizations, drug traffickers and other criminals is common, increasing the danger to travelers. The US Secretary of State has designated the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, the National Liberation Army and the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia as “foreign terrorist organizations.”

—Mireille Gold and Clifton L. Holland