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PANAMA

Human Trafficking Denounced

On 3 June, the US State Department released its '05 annual Trafficking in Persons Report and again placed Panama on the list of 150 countries involved in human trafficking worldwide. Panama was first included in this report last year. According to the '04 report, an increase in information “pointed to a significant number of victims” and, therefore, made it necessary to include the country in the report.

Panama is a source, transit point and destination country for men, women and children trafficked for the purposes of labor and sexual exploitation,” according to the report. Although the State Department commends the passage of a new comprehensive anti-trafficking law, it is still concerned about a visa program that, according to the report, “facilitates the import of foreign women for prostitution, and is likely exploited by traffickers.”

The report discusses improvements made in investigation, prosecuting and punishing traffickers during '04, and says that since the implementation of the new trafficking law at least 82 cases have been investigated by the Attorney General's office and 24 cases by the Technical Judicial Police (TJP), four times the number of those investigated by the TJP in '03. The Attorney General's office ordered the detention of several high-ranking members of the National Police in Mar '05 for charges relating to sexual trafficking. However, under the new law, zero trafficking convictions have been reported.

A lack of coordination between law enforcement agencies has made it difficult to investigate and prosecute cases involving adult trafficking victims. The Panamanian government, according to the US State Department, improved its efforts to prevent trafficking over '04 with a series of new prevention campaigns but still must do more.

In an interview with *Inforpress*, a former official of the State Security Council whose name was withheld said that for over five years a network of trafficking Chinese and South Americans has been operating in Panama.

The anonymous former official said that a *coyote* would charge between \$2,000 and \$12,000 a person for passage from Peru and Ecuador to the US through Panama, while lawyers arranged special visas costing \$1,000 to \$50,000. Due to the lucrative nature of the business it is very difficult

to combat the crime, and the former official went on to say that it is simply not a priority of the authorities to end this situation.

On 14 June '04, Teresita Guerra de Solórzano, the Vice-Consul of Panama in Ecuador, was dismissed for the sale of illegal visas. The Panamanian Ambassador to Peru, Roberto Díaz Herrera, admitted to having made a small fortune in trafficking people from Cuba and China to the US during the past two decades. Congressional candidate Abraham Bárcenas was recently involved in a trafficking scandal involving Cubans while he was the Panamanian Ambassador to Cuba ('99-'03). Each year 10,000 people pass through Panama on the way to the US.

Ramón Lima, the director of immigration, presented his resignation to President Martín Torrijos in late June after facing corruption charges. Local television Channel 3 reported that an anonymous informant said Lima was involved in a sexual relationship with an undocumented detainee and also provided female detainees with alcohol, among other acts.

Molotov in the PRD

At midnight on 20 June, two molotov cocktails were thrown into the balcony at the offices of the Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD) in the city of Colón. The resulting fire was put out by local firefighters, but the fire damaged the balcony as well as the windows and file cabinets in the offices.

Justino París, administrator of the PRD office, considered the act as an “attempt against the collective” and said that since protests against the Social Security reforms began in late May, the PRD has received threats as well as rocks thrown at the building by passing protesters.

The Technical Judicial Police were immediately notified by the firefighters. According to various statements by neighbors, a truck was seen suspiciously driving around the neighborhood that night.

Explosives to be Relocated

The Interoceanic Regional Authority turned over to the Ministry of Government 14 bunkers, located in Horoko, Arraiján, that were formerly used by the US military for munitions storage. The bunkers will now be used as depositories for 100,000 tons of industrial explosives. This massive deposit of explosives was left behind by the US military after it left the old Canal Zone in Dec '99 (Vol. 20, No. 1).

The explosives will be moved by firefighters from the current site in Cativá, Colón, because that storage facility is obsolete and compromises the security of the population. Some of the explosives will be saved and can be used for construction.

End to Social Security Reform Strike

The government approved, on 27 June, a 90-day suspension of the Social Security Reform, Law 17, that led to paralyzing strikes throughout the country beginning in late May (Vol. 24, No. 6).

On 25 June, President Martín Torrijos announced that he would suspend the reform and that same day the National Front for the Defense of Social Security (FRENADESSO), made up of teachers and workers, agreed to join the national dialogue, which was initiated by Torrijos 22 June. This “great dialogue,” according to Torrijos, is aimed at improving Law 17 which reformed social security, the

law increased the age of retirement as well as enacted other reforms that were rejected by many Panamanians.

On 27 June, after the government asked Congress to suspend the law, the unions and worker organizations ended the strikes that had been going on for a month. The medical employees and the Social Security employees announced that on 28 June they would go back to work, while construction workers returned to their jobs on 27 June.

On the night of 27 June, the Minister of Education, announced that classes would start Wednesday, 29 June, at 7:00 a.m. in all primary and secondary public schools. This resolution came after an agreement between the teachers' union and the Minister was reached that there would be no reprisals against the teachers or an extension of the school year because of the strikes.

The agreement by the unions to end the strike came the week after a massive demonstration throughout the country on 23 June, which, according to police, included approximately 10,000 demonstrators.

Torrijos has assured that through the national dialogue the reforms can be modified to gain popular support.

—*Alex Carney*