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PANAMA

George W. Bush, Mireya Moscoso and Luis Posada Carriles

The actions of US President George W. Bush have been questioned internationally after he rewarded former Panamanian President Mireya Moscoso by granting her a US visa, which contradicts the policy of denying US visas to corrupt foreign officials, and after he gave favorable treatment to anti-Castro Cuban terrorists who currently live in Florida.

Former President Moscoso ('99-'04) is being investigated in Panama for misusing \$23.1 million in government funds during her five-year term in office, which were allegedly spent on clothes, jewelry, liquor, gifts, foreign travel and Christmas decorations (Vol. 23, No. 11). After Moscoso's term in office ended, she fled the country to Miami, Florida, where she resides today.

Just before leaving office in Aug '04, Moscoso pardoned four anti-Castro Cuban exiles who were in prison for plotting to assassinate Cuban President Fidel Castro in Panama City during the tenth Iberian-American summit in '00. Three of the four pardoned men boarded a charter plane that landed at Opa Locka airport in Florida. The other man, Luis Posada Carriles, boarded a different plane bound for Honduras.

Posada is a well-known anti-Castro terrorist. The former CIA operative left Cuba after the revolution in '59 and has dedicated his life to overthrowing the Cuban leader. He was trained by US forces for the '61 Bay of Pigs Invasion. Posada has acknowledged his involvement in the '97 bombings of Cuban hotels that killed an Italian tourist. In '85, he escaped from a Venezuelan prison where he was awaiting trial after being accused of blowing up a Cuban airliner in '76. The blast killed 73 people, including 23 members of the Cuban fencing team (Vol. 23, No. 9).

According to Posada's lawyers in Miami, "...[their] client had entered the US from Mexico and would be applying for political asylum and a US Green Card." The Cuban press indicates that the US Embassy in Panama assisted Posada in hiding in Central America by giving him a false US passport under the name of Melvin C. Thompson.

Under the new US anti-terrorism policy, political asylum cannot be granted to a person suspected of being a terrorist and Posada is considered just that by Cuba, Venezuela, Panama and Honduras. By harboring Posada in the US, the Bush administration would be going against its own policy, thus demonstrating to the world that the US does not follow its own rules in the War on Terrorism.

Illegal Weapons Confiscated

A Panamanian father and his son were arrested when an illegal weapons shipment was discovered in their truck when stopped by police and the Prosecutor's Office for Drug Crimes in Arraiján, located about 10 miles west of Panama City, on 18 Apr. The weapons were found hidden under boxes of plantains and consisted of 42 AK-47s, an M-16, an Uzi, five grenades, a Czech-made assault rifle and 6,900 rounds of ammunition. According to the police, the weapons were from the province of Chiriquí on the border with Costa Rica and were bound for Colombian rebels. A public ceremony was held 18 Apr to destroy the confiscated weapons along with an additional 1,450 weapons from Panama's national arsenal.

Whale Sanctuary and Ecotourism

President Martin Torrijos is changing the way Panama is viewed worldwide, environmentally, by creating a new law to protect whales and their offspring in Pacific coastal waters. Law 13, passed 5 May, creates a marine sanctuary in Panamanian territorial waters where the hunting of whales is prohibited and the study and investigation of the mammals is promoted. Torrijos stated, "With this law, we are sending the world a clear sign that Panamanians possess an elevated conscience of defense for wildlife."

Whales have migration routes along the Pacific coast of Panama and require large amounts of space to travel. The mayor of Panama City, Juan Carlos Navarro, proclaimed: "The law is a historical success for Panama and the international environmental community." Now, whales that enter the reserve are considered a protected species and Panama is responsible for their safety, as well as for maintaining environmental sustainability in the sanctuary. The refuge will provide a safe area for the repopulation of these mammals.

Torrijos assured Panamanians that the new law would not affect commercial or sport fishing in anyway. He also stated, "These areas are rich in marine life and, for this reason, are part of our potential tourism."

Indigenous Handcrafts Gaining International Recognition

Basket weavers of Panama's Embera and Wounaan indigenous groups are gaining international attention for their artistic handcrafts. Their hand-woven baskets have fetched \$1,000 and up at markets in North America. Embera baskets are nature oriented with weavings of flora and fauna, while Wounaan baskets follow geometric patterns. Because their artwork is being bought locally and sold internationally, the more skilled artists will become well known and wealthy in comparison to the majority of the indigenous population.

The prices of some handcrafts are determined by the buyers and sellers, whereas some are determined by the community as a whole. In some communities, the continuous production and selling of these works of art is about survival. Santiago Guaynora explained, “The floods washed away almost all of our crops, so the community met to look at means to sustain ourselves and our children to get food and medicine.” With agriculture as the main source of income, the income from basket sales provides a much needed source of income.

Embera communities also depend on wood carving as an income source. The most sought after item is a “medicine stick” that healers use with their patients. These items are carved in tropical wood and tagau nuts. Everything is handcrafted and in communities without electricity the tools used are also made by the people. Like the basket weavers, the higher skilled carvers are bound for national recognition due to the international buying and selling of their products.

—*Kelsi Schindler*