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PANAMA

Panama and Egypt Sign Cultural and Educational Agreement

On 16 Apr, the governments of Panama and Egypt signed an agreement to promote, develop and consolidate the cultural and educative relations between both nations. This agreement puts into use once again the previous cultural agreement signed by both countries in '60.

The new agreement was signed by the Panamanian Vice Minister of International Relations, Ricardo J. Durán, and the Egyptian Deputy Foreign Minister for the Americas, Hatem Aziz El Nasr, who was on a three-day visit in the Panamanian capital. Egyptian interest in Panama is largely derived from the nation's seat on the UN Security Council during next year.

Through this agreement, both nations have decided to offer, promote, establish and exchange different educational and cultural ideas that will result in the development and strengthening of a bilateral tie.

The Egyptian Deputy Foreign Minister also met with the Panamanian Minister of Commerce, Alejandro Ferrer, and with the President of the Legislative Assembly, Elías Castillo.

The visit of El Nasr to Panama was part of a tour through Latin America that included Mexico, Cuba and Brazil, where he was also to exchange points of view about regional and international issues.

Authorities of Panama and Costa Rica Complete Plan Against Child Exploitation

As a result of the high levels of Indigenous migration, child labor and sexual exploitation of minors, the authorities of Panama and Costa Rica are drafting a letter of understanding permitting them to undertake actions that will help diminish these problems, reported Felipe Cano, Panamanian Vice Minister of Social Development, on 18 Apr.

The objective of the two-day meeting in David, the capital of Chiriquí Province, was to reach an agreement on the topics of education, health and social development, related to the basic necessities of Indigenous children in both countries.

Participants in the meeting included the President of the National Child Welfare Agency of Costa Rica, Mario Víquez; the Vice Minister of Social Development of Panama, Felipe Cano; the Costa Rican Vice Minister of Labor, Guillermo Matamoros; the Panamanian Minister of Labor Reinaldo Rivera; the Sub-regional Coordinator of the International Child Labor Eradication Program of the International Labor Organization (ILO), Guillermo Dema; and Indigenous leaders from both countries.

Dema explained that the actual policies have started to show very encouraging results in terms of the reduction and prevention of child labor in both countries; nevertheless, they have not yet had the desired impact within the Indigenous communities, for which it has become urgent to establish strategies among these populations.

According to the ILO, at least 60,000 Ngobe-Buglé Indigenous migrate during seven months of the year to work in the coffee, sugar cane and banana plantations in the regions of San Vito and Los Santos, Costa Rica, and also in the vegetable crops, principally in the districts of Volcán Cerro Punta, Renacimiento and Boquete, Panama. These families predominately emigrate towards Costa Rica in search of better education, healthcare and income.

The ILO also indicated that 15.5% of the Indigenous children between 10 and 14 years are involved in some type of child labor; for adolescents between 15 and 17 years, it is as high as 41.4%. Within the non-Indigenous population, the percentage of child workers is 6.3% and among adolescents it reaches 23%.

Child labor is presently characterized by the participation of very small children (4 and 5 years of age) in long workdays, poor living conditions, dangerous jobs and especially the inability to attend school.

In Panama, the government has made the first steps in attacking the problem by implementing the Opportunity Network program. Felipe Cano explained that the program provides the families with financial support, under the condition that the children visit health clinics and attend school.

Up to now, the program has granted 40,000 scholarships to children and adolescents that were at risk in Panama. "In Chiriquí [the program] has rescued 450 youths and children from the streets, and today they study thanks to the scholarships," Cano added.

Governments Create Joint Task Force to Fight Delinquency

On 13 Apr, Panamanian Vice President Samuel Lewis Navarro announced that the governments of Colombia and Panama have created a joint task force as a mechanism to confront crimes committed by Colombian citizens in Panama.

This joint force "is in addition to the measures of cooperation" already in effect between both countries, Lewis said, and explained that the task force would only act upon the request of Panama.

In addition, the Panamanian foreign minister requested the help of Colombia in identifying Panamanian "criminal subjects where there is an indication of a connection with Colombian citizens."

Panamanian officials will take advantage of Colombia's vast experience in the fight against delinquency and criminality, emphasized Lewis, who traveled on 13 Apr to Bogotá for a one-day official visit.

In the joint press conference with the Colombian Minister of International Relations, Fernando Araújo, Lewis explained that his government had opened this direct fight against criminal behavior to avoid new and different forms of criminal activity. Although he abstained from connecting Panama's security problem with a particular country or nationality, he suggested a connection between certain Panamanian sectors and Colombians in defending the required Visa for that country.

The Colombian-Panamanian Commission of Neighbors tackled the matter on 12 Apr, when it opened its 12th meeting with the arrival of Lewis. This meeting was preceded by the joint conferences of mixed commissions of technical, scientific, cultural, education and sports cooperation.

“There are very effective mechanisms that execute better immigration control between our two countries,” said Lewis, who also observed that the Commission should “differentiate the criminal migration and delinquency from the migration we are promoting in terms of tourism, investment and economics.”

Minister Araújo stated at the same meeting that, “we have agreed to this joint labor between the security forces of both countries, whose border of 266 kilometers has been utilized for narcotic and arms trafficking.”

—*Christina Patchett*