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PANAMA

Overwhelming YES Given to Canal Modernization Plan

On Sunday 22 Oct, Panamanian voters overwhelmingly endorsed a plan to modernize the Panama Canal, won over by arguments that the \$5.25 billion project would generate jobs, improve the economy, and keep the canal relevant for future generations.

“Panama is betting on its future,” said President Martín Torrijos, the chief backer of the expansion plan, after casting his ballot in the nationwide referendum.

The official results of the referendum gave the expansion plan just under 80% support, far more than the simple majority needed. A referendum is required for major changes to the canal, a provision of the law meant to give the people ownership of a resource that had long been in the hands of foreigners. Still, most registered voters stayed away from the polls, with the turnout estimated at 44%.

However, the approval is a significant victory for the Torrijos administration, which staked its reputation on the project, known as the Torrijos-Alemán Zubieta Plan. The current president’s father, Gen. Omar Torrijos, negotiated in the ’70s with President Jimmy Carter for the US to hand over the canal to Panama at the end of ’99; this agreement is known as the Torrijos-Carter Treaty.

The modernization plan, scheduled to begin next year, will double the canal’s capacity by adding a third set of locks that are 40% longer and 60% wider than the current ones. Constructed by the US government between 1904-1914, the existing canal now is congested and too small to handle the world’s largest vessels: cruise liners, military ships, container ships and oil tankers.

Opposition to the project was vigorous as critics questioned the government’s cost estimates and its environmental impact study, and raised fears that corruption and mismanagement would doom the project (Vol. 25, No. 10).

But the government’s campaign for the expansion plan, the largest modernization of the canal in its history, was even more intense. Supporters portrayed a “YES” vote as a vote for the children of Panama and their future well-being. Without an expanded canal, it was predicted, international shipping traffic would find other routes and Panama’s growing economy would dry up (Vol. 21, No. 8).

US vessels are the biggest users of the current canal, followed by Chinese and Japanese ships, according to the Panama Canal Authority. The canal handles about 4% of global trade.

The canal, which is 51-miles long and currently employs 8,000 Panamanians, is a source of national pride, as well as a major source of foreign currency. But even as skyscrapers go up at a furious pace in downtown Panama City, 40% of the country's three million residents live in poverty.

The canal expansion, which will be financed by loans and higher fees charged to shippers, is scheduled to be completed in '14. Canal officials predict that a decade after its completion the expanded canal will generate \$6 billion a year, far more than the \$1.4 billion in revenue expected this year. During construction, which will not interrupt shipping traffic, canal officials anticipate that about 7,000 new jobs will be created, and that another 40,000 workers will be benefited indirectly.

"We've gotten a clear mandate," said Jorge Quijano, the Canal Authority's maritime operations director. "We now have an opportunity to continue to grow."

Panama Offered UN Security Council Seat

On 1 Nov, Guatemala and Venezuela agreed to withdraw from the race for a seat on the UN Security Council and to support Panama as a consensus candidate. With the backing of these two countries, Panama's election to a two-year term on the Security Council is virtually certain.

The announcement by Ecuador's UN Ambassador Diego Cordovez, who hosted two meetings between the foreign ministers of Guatemala and Venezuela, ended a deadlock between the two countries that dragged on through 47 UN votes.

The voting had become highly political because the US was supporting Guatemala over leftist Venezuela, whose fiercely anti-US president, Hugo Chávez, referred last month to President George Bush as "the devil" in a controversial speech to the UN General Assembly.

With pressure mounting from Latin American countries to break the voting deadlock, Guatemalan Foreign Minister Gert Rosenthal and Venezuelan Foreign Minister Nicolas Maduro met with Ecuador's Cordovez on 1 Nov to discuss withdrawing from the race and supporting a third candidate.

Asked why Panama had been selected, Rosenthal said: "It's a country that unites South America and Central America. We're concerned about the idea of divisions between the north and the south of Latin America. We would like to put that idea to rest by seeking a country that is well received at both extremes of our continent."

Contaminated Medicine Kills 34 and Counting

There is a medical crisis in Panama, where contaminated cough syrup and other medications have killed 34 people since July. More than 40 others have been hospitalized, at least half in critical condition.

The government has recalled 24 types of medication produced by Panama's national health system, suspended production at all government pharmaceutical factories, and even gone door to door to issue warnings and collect contaminated products.

But people keep dying. "We are facing a crisis," said David Abrego, director of a government clinic that has evaluated hundreds of people who fear being poisoned. "The people are apprehensive. There's a lot of tension and nervousness."

The contaminated medicines contained a chemical cousin of antifreeze, diethylene glycol, which is used to keep glue and cosmetics moist (Vol. 25, No. 10). Health officials think there may be upwards of 100,000 bottles of contaminated cough syrup, 20,000 of which have not been recovered. It is unclear how many of the other contaminated products are still on the street.

The US Center for Disease Control (CDC) traced the outbreak to the cough syrup on 12 Oct, and Panamanian health authorities soon realized that the contamination involved other medicines as well. On 18 Oct, health authorities set up 34 clinics across the nation to identify the sick and perform blood tests for kidney damage. The Health Ministry said that nearly 50,000 people have had blood tests.

Abrego said that health officials are particularly worried about rural areas, where information about the contaminated products is scarce. The CDC has four investigators in Panama, searching remote areas for new cases.

The national health system provides free healthcare for all Panamanians, 40% of whom live in poverty.

Biologists Establish a Noah's Ark Frog Rescue Project

As of 26 Oct, more than 300 frogs were being cared for at the Campestre Hotel in El Valle de Anton, because of an audacious and hastily created rescue plan. The hotel lies in the shadow of steep mountains at the edge of a dormant volcano about 50 miles southwest of Panama City.

In Mar, Panamanian biologist Edgardo Griffith spotted a dead frog in a stream near El Valle. He scooped it up, went home and cried. Griffith said he suspected that the frog's demise was due to a deadly fungus called chytrid, which was later confirmed by a laboratory in the US.

Biologists had been watching the fungus brutally work its way through Central America for a decade, but Griffith's discovery proved that it had arrived in the rainforests of Panama much faster than anyone had expected. The naturally occurring fungus invades the skin of amphibians, which breathe through their skin, and effectively suffocates them.

In a panic, Griffith started talking, talking to everyone he could find who would listen. Soon, an international network of biologists, zookeepers and environmentalists was involved. Together, they devised a rescue plan: to create a Noah's Ark for frogs in a Panama hotel.

Biologists, environmentalists and employees from more than 20 US zoos soon began traveling to Panama, where they searched through streams in the rainforests of El Valle at night, collecting

specimens of 40 threatened species of frogs and toads. The frogs, besides being beautiful and prized as national symbols, also are considered critical consumers of mosquitoes and many crop-destroying pests.

Each night, the investigators returned to the quarantine zone of the Campestre Hotel with their catch. The hotel had become the frogs' own "Hotel California," a place where they could check in but could never check out. The volunteers found glass-like frogs with skin so translucent that their organs are always on full display. They picked up frogs that look like rocks and eat freshwater crabs, aggressive tree frogs and shy, nocturnal toads.

But the famous "golden frogs" are the stars. Panamanians have revered them for countless centuries. Ancient Indigenous peoples are said to have come each year to El Valle to collect the frogs, which were considered symbols of prosperity and virility.

The biologists who collected the frogs were an inspired group dedicated to what they saw as a desperate mission. But that is not what the local inhabitants thought. The locals thought the foreigners were poachers and that the fungus threat was a hoax. A newspaper even ran an editorial cartoon that showed a man fleeing the country with a suitcase that had frog legs sticking out.

Adrian Benedetti, the charismatic young director of the Summit Zoo outside Panama City and a supporter of the frog rescue project, stepped in to provide damage control. "Zoos know how to talk to the public. Sometimes biologists don't," Benedetti said.

With public opposition quelled, the frog rescue project entered its next phase: building a state-of-the-art center at a private zoo in El Valle to house the delicate frogs. The nearly completed center will be the ecological equivalent of a nuclear fallout shelter, a refuge from a toxic environment and an uncertain future.

Its organizers hope that the center could be a model for other threatened species that might need to be temporarily or permanently removed from the wild to be saved from extinction. Scientists are now calculating exactly how many frogs of each species will be needed to prevent genetic mutations. They are also developing techniques for managing in-house breeding.

The most difficult question, perhaps, is about the future. Biologists know that chytrid fungus kills all amphibians it touches, but they are not sure how long it will stick around.

"We're all kind of scratching our heads for the answer about what is going to happen next," said Pete Riger of the Houston Zoo, which is the driving force behind the El Valle conservation center project.

—Clifton L. Holland