

# *MESOAMERICA*

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## **PANAMA**

### **Poverty Report**

President Martín Torrijos presented a report at the World Summit in New York (Millennium + 5) that indicated four out of every ten Panamanians live in poverty. The report was given to the president on 6 Sep by the Ministry of Social Development and cited an increase in poverty in the rural sectors of the country as well as in the areas with high indigenous populations.

In '04, Panama's per capita GDP was estimated at \$6,900. This number, however, does little to acknowledge the large disparity between the rich and the poor that exists in Panama. "It is a report that calls all Panamanians to reflect, with statistics up to '03 that are really alarming in a country that has not been able to reduce its poverty index," said Torrijos.

Torrijos himself did acknowledge the income gap that exists in Panama. He called on society as a whole, not only the government, to inform themselves about this problem and to share a preoccupation in finding a solution.

Although the report does cite certain advances that the country has made in recent years, for example, in improved education, it warns that gender inequality is still a problem. It is urgent for the country to transform itself, Torrijos said, "or we will continue producing a society in which it will be nearly impossible to progress, where opportunities for children do not exist, where opportunities for women do not exist."

### **Torrijos Overhauls Government Staff**

President Torrijos made 17 sweeping staff changes in his government earlier this month, some occurring within his own Cabinet. Many officials were simply rotated to serve at different posts, while others were dismissed and replaced.

Former Minister of Education Juan Bosco Bernal was replaced by Vice Minister of Education Miguel Angel Cañizalez. Leonor Calderón, former head of Social Development, was replaced by María del Carmen Roquebert. In all, nine government officials were rotated to different positions within the government.

Torrijos' decision was met with some criticism. Roberto Henríquez of the Democratic Change Party argued that the changes "do not impress, nor will they guarantee the best performance of the

Cabinet.” According to Henríquez, many of those replaced by Torrijos are little more than scape-goats who have been fired as a means to stem popular discontent with the government, while other dysfunctional members continue to govern, thanks only to their relationships with the president.

On the other hand, the president of the Panamanian Association of Business Executives (APEDE), Enrique De Obarrio, applauded Torrijos’ changes, calling attention to the number of capable women that were hired to work on his staff.

### **Second Largest Cocaine Bust in Panamanian History**

On 24 Sep, members of the National Aerial Service (SAN) and the National Police (PN) confiscated four tons of cocaine from a farm in the north-central province of Colón. Along with the drugs, PN officers confiscated two AK-47 assault rifles and a satellite telephone, and made a total of eight arrests.

Responding to a suspicious, fast moving boat picked up on radar, the SAN and PN were sent to a farm on the banks of the Caimito River in Colón. Upon arrival, PN officers uncovered four tons of cocaine stored in 3,979 packages inside of 199 sacks, camouflaged under palm leaves. The bust is second only to one that occurred in ’92, which uncovered a shipment of 5.4 tons of cocaine, also in the province of Colón.

Of the eight detained suspects, one is Colombian, seven are Panamanian citizens and two are minors, 15 and 17 years of age. “In this we see how the drug traffickers are using underage kids, something that constitutes a doubly serious failure in our penal legislation,” said Patricio Candanedo, Special Prosecutor for drugs in Panama.

According to reports, this was the second shipment of drugs to pass through this same property, allegedly owned by the brother of a government representative. The drugs had arrived in Panama en route to Honduras, later to be taken to Guatemala and finally to Mexico, before reaching their final destination in the US market. Héctor Alemán, the Minister of Interior and Justice, estimates that the confiscated cocaine represents 40 million individual street deals.

“Not just any group can manage four tons of drugs. For that you need organization, storage, transportation and protection of the merchandise,” said Candanedo.

—*Ian McLoone*