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## Work Starts on Panama Canal Expansion

by Mike Leffert

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On Sept. 3, with former US President Jimmy Carter and Panama's President Martin Torrijos standing by, workers blasted away a hillside to begin the US\$5.25 billion expansion of the Panama Canal. Carter was there because, with Torrijos' father Omar Torrijos, he signed the 1977 treaties that returned the canal to Panama at the end of the 20th century (see NotiCen, 1999-12-16, 2000-01-20 and 2000-05-25).

When the smoke and shower of water cleared, Torrijos told the world, "We are witnesses to an exceptional and unique act." The exceptional and unique act will have to be repeated countless times until 2015 and use an anticipated 5.3 million kg of explosives to double the 80 km canal's capacity. This explosion and the ones to come were made possible by a referendum last year (see NotiCen, 2006-10-26). It is expected that the expansion will be paid for by an increase in the tolls ships pay to traverse the locks (see NotiCen, 2006-10-26).

The US will be the main beneficiary of the expansion. It is by far the largest user of the facility with two-thirds of the traffic going through either going to or coming from there. The second-largest user is China. Panama will benefit from the increased revenues.

### *Mud, chaos, and national pride*

The new construction also decreases the likelihood of Panama's becoming irrelevant to transoceanic shipping with the building of a canal, wet or dry, elsewhere on the isthmus. Through the years, several schemes have been floated that include a canal through Nicaragua's lakes and overland railroad bridges between the Atlantic and the Pacific at various points (see EcoCentral, 1996-09-26 and NotiCen, 2005-10-27). The initial blast, using 13,800 kg of explosives, trimmed Cerro Paraiso from 136 to just 46 meters above sea level. About 50,000 Panamanians showed up for the event, which they considered of historic importance.

The occasion turned into a chaotic mess when, after Minister of Tourism Ruben Blades' rendition of the national anthem, the skies opened up, drenching the area with the first drops from Hurricane Felix, which was to slam the isthmus further north. The deluge sent the masses scurrying, but they had nowhere to go because of a lack of transportation. Many just took off their shoes and walked off through the mud in search of shelter or a bus.

Some stayed to hear, or try to hear, Torrijos praise Carter because "his deed was decisive to achieve a just negotiation between a great power and a country that was small, but with powerful historical reasons to reclaim its territorial integration." He thereupon activated the mechanism that blew the hill to smithereens and released thousands of red, white, and blue balloons. Carter called the event "one of the most gratifying experiences of my life."

On hand was Vice President and Foreign Minister Samuel Lewis Navarro, whose father, Gabriel Lewis Galindo, was Gen. Torrijos' foreign minister. Also present for the event were Presidents Manuel Zelaya of Honduras, Antonio Saca of El Salvador, Daniel Ortega of Nicaragua, and Alvaro Uribe of Colombia. The Central Americans beat a hasty exit to get back to their countries to deal with the fast-approaching hurricane.

Speakers made much of Panama's expert management of the canal since the return, and William Rogers, Carter's assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs, noted, "Because of the canal treaty and under the leadership of Panama, the relationship between Latin America and the United States changed. The image of Latin America is very different now than before. The Latin American countries are stronger and can defend their sovereignty and their individuality." Rogers had played a major role in the negotiations.

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