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Regional Presidents Launch a Renamed, Resized Plan Puebla Panama; it is Proyecto Mesoamericana Now

by LADB Staff

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Plan Puebla Panama (PPP) is dead. Long live Proyecto Mesoamericana. The newly resurrected and freshly named plan, or proyecto, is but a shadow of its former self, about 5% of the former PPP, by all estimates. The original mega project was reputed to have sprung from the mind of Mexico's former President Vicente Fox (2000-2006), but most of it never escaped the conceptual realm.

The current set of presidents, from Mexico to Colombia, met June 28 in Mexico at the Tenth Annual Tuxtla Summit which actually took place in Villahermosa to edit the grandiose tome of entrepreneurial fantasies down to a slim volume of doable jobs. The summit is formally titled the Decima Cumbre del Mecanismo de Dialogo y Concertacion de Tuxtla Gutierrez.

As a tiny fraction of its predecessor, the new Proyecto Mesoamericana, alternatively called the Proyecto de Integracion y Desarrollo de Mesoamerica, is no small thing. Carried over from PPP is a coastal shipping plan that Panama wanted, upgrades of border-administration projects, epidemiological monitoring, and bio-fuel projects. The really big stuff includes upgrading and modernizing 12,604 km of highways in Central America, divided into 16 highway corridors and roads.

As a whole, this project was intended to provide seamless transport from producers' front yards throughout the isthmus down to Colombia to the doorstep of the great northern consumer market. It would reduce end-to-end transport time to six days from the current 11 by 2010. This plan calls for each country to build its own roads, connecting them with main highways in neighboring countries.

At last estimate, the combined cost would be US\$6.4 billion. Another US\$1.44 billion to build 1,797 km of new road in the project has never been obtained. The whole system will cost more than US \$9.3 billion and that does not even count the train. President Antonio Saca of El Salvador announced that a regional railroad would now be a high priority.

The Sistema de Interconexion Electrica para America Central (SIEPAC) will remain plugged in. Its original stated goal was to set the price of electricity at US\$.05 kw/h as an average in all Central American countries by the year 2010. It also was to create a booming private market in power sales from the expanded grid. It was a US\$337 million project that included connecting to the Panama-Colombia, the Guatemala-Mexico, and the Guatemala-Belize grids, as well as the Autopista Mesoamericana de Informacion (AMI) fiber optic cable in Honduras.

In anticipation of the action taken at the summit, in early June Mexican Foreign Minister Patricia Espinosa offered some perspective on the extent of the diminution. "PPP was managing nearly 100 projects, surpassing our institutional and financial capacity," she said. "We have agreed to clean

up the portfolio and define which initiatives we will concentrate on." Since its launch in 2001, some 34,000 individual projects have consumed US\$4.5 billion.

Kinder, gentler, tinier

But it was not all shrinkage. Gone was the hell-bent-for- privatization rhetoric of PPP. The new proyecto has reframed development rhetoric to reflect the realities of the human beings that inhabit the area. Calderon said the need now is for "a profound revision and restructuring of Plan Puebla Panama that responds effectively to the necessities of development." The poor are now to be afforded something more than a grip on their own bootstraps. The presidents added to Proyecto Mesoamericana some new initiatives, reflecting some new perceptions of what poor people needed.

Mexican President Felipe Calderon announced a US\$33 million fund to build some 50,000 houses for poor families in Central America under what will be called the Programa de Vivienda Social en Centroamerica. The money is to come from a fund of the Pacto de San Jose, the 1969 international human rights agreement, and would be used for mortgage credits. This contributed to an impression that the region's top leaders had begun to look at human rights through a less opportunistic lens than has previously been the case, in effect reconceptualizing PPP. Calderon saw this as a short-term effort that would eventually provide a half-million houses. The presidents backed the creation of a Mesoamerican Institute of Public Health that would allow massive purchases of drugs, vaccines, and other medical supplies at a savings to the individual countries. Under the plan, purchasing would be handled by the Instituto Mexicano de Salud Publica, with the expectation that a similar mechanism could be used for regional food and fertilizer acquisition.

In a 60-point declaration, the leaders pledged to respect the human rights of migrants. In that regard, they took special notice of the recent European Union (EU) decision to criminalize Latin American migrants without immigration documents on the continent. They warned of "negative repercussions" to the EU approach. "We manifest our most serious concern for the negative repercussions that these kinds of policies, which criminalize migration, have on the human rights and dignity of people," said the text.

Accommodating recalcitrant Colombia

The presidents committed to a coordinated, integrated response to the food crisis, as it continues to threaten poor populations with hunger as a result of out-of-reach prices. Intensive cultivation of basic grains will be encouraged with the goal of regional self-sufficiency. But consensus broke down on the related issue of biofuels. President Daniel Ortega of Nicaragua called the production of food crops for conversion to vehicular fuel "a mortal sin," under present conditions. But his mortal enemy, President Alvaro Uribe of Colombia, framed such production as a means of regional development. The two presidents are worlds apart politically, but the disagreement is also a consequence of the expanded notion of Mesoamerica, stretched to embrace Colombia with its more clearly South American interests.

Ortega's criticism was not just a swipe at a political adversary. The biofuel issue also brought President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva in for a dose of the Nicaraguan's invective. "We absolutely do

not share this project of Lula's. He is the one who dreamed up this [biofuel] proposal," Ortega said of the Brazilian. The foregoing is not to say that there is no tension between Bogota and Managua (see SourceMex, 2008-06-18). Before the talks, Uribe's government issued a statement to the effect that Ortega was an "apologist for terrorism." To keep the waters calm, in his opening statement, host Calderon made a "call to intensify the political dialogue to resolve our differences," not mentioning either of the two presidents.

As a summary of the summit's events reveal, the presidents appear to have had something of a therapy session directed at Uribe's ability to get along with others. The media reported Uribe had said he did not intend for the issues with Ortega to become part of the summit, but, practically speaking, it clearly already had. Guatemala's President Alvaro Colom said he and his fellow presidents intended to speak to both of them. That never happened for Colom, because he had to leave the meetings to deal with the death of his minister and vice minister of the interior in a helicopter crash.

The closing agreement of the summit also called for closer cooperation between the presidents and the US on the issue of the Merida Initiative (see NotiCen, 2008-06-19 and SourceMex, 2008-06-11) and questions of sovereignty related to it.

The group got behind encouragement for Colombia and Ecuador to restart talks aimed at patching a rift that began with the Colombian military's incursion into Ecuador (see NotiSur, 2008-05-09) to raid a camp of the guerrilla group Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC). Colombia is a member of the Tuxtla Summit group, Ecuador is not. Colombia was last to join PPP in 2006 (see Noticen, 2007-04-19). A summary of the summit is as follows:

Next year's summit will be held in Costa Rica.

The group's obligation to respect and protect the rights migrants is reaffirmed.

The leaders "deeply" regretted the EU's criminalization and deportation of Latin American migrants.

They reiterated their intent to cooperate with each other and with the US and the Merida Initiative "based on the principles of respect for the sovereignty" of the countries.

They encouraged member-country Colombia and its neighbor Ecuador to solve their dispute regarding Colombia's military incursion.

They also encouraged rapprochement between Uribe and Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez. * They committed to a feasibility study of a regional railroad.

They agreed to plan and execute a project for the development of short-distance maritime transport.

To facilitate implementing the SIEPAC network, they agreed to encourage the Nicaraguan and Costa Rican legislatures to ratify the II Protocolo al Tratado Marco del Mercado Electrico Regional en America Central.

They agreed to guarantee food security to regional populations.

They agreed to negotiations aimed at coordinating existing trade treaties to move toward a Mesoamerican association agreement.

The reorientation of Proyecto Mesoamericana, with its new humanitarian blush, does not, however, erase the many counterhumanitarian aspects of PPP. Major road projects in Guatemala, for instance, still involve severe negative environmental impacts and incursions on community lands. The Franja Transversal del Norte (FTN), a PPP project that connects the northern tier of departments with Mexico and Belize, depends on public and private investment and approval of the legislature. That approval would come in the form of a law, the law of Public-Private Participation. Mario Marroquin of the Programa Nacional de la Competitividad (PRONACOM) said that law permits land expropriation in cases "of national urgency to construct or modernize."

Another law essential to the completion of Proyecto Mesoamericana projects is the Right of Passage Law. This one would, according to reports, force communities in the way to give up their lands. Similarly, expropriatory laws are in the works in connection with SIEPAC-related electricity generation, all of which could head the country toward constitutional conflict. Attorney Carlos Molina Mencos told a reporter, "It is important to be careful if private land is going to be expropriated as there has to be a previous payment in accordance with Article 40 of the Constitution and expropriation is only lawful in case of genuine public utility, social benefit, or public interest, all of which must be proven."

The new name presented some rhetorical problems as well. If Mesoamerica extends from mid-Mexico to more or less Nicaragua, then what are all those countries south of there doing in it? Well, explained El Salvador's Saca, that's just really anthropologically speaking. "Geographically and geopolitically, it reaches to Colombia." Demographically, said Saca, the new geopolitical Mesoamerica is home to 190 million people.

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