Opponents of Nicaraguan Canal Project Demand Greater Transparency

Benjamin Witte-Lebhar

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiCen by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.
Opponents of Nicaraguan Canal Project Demand Greater Transparency

by Benjamin Witte-Lebhar
Category/Department: Nicaragua
Published: 2015-07-16

Two years after giving an untested Chinese firm carte blanche to build and operate a behemoth ocean-to-ocean canal, the Nicaraguan government is finally in possession of what critics say it ought to have had from the outset: an extensive Environmental and Social Impact Assessment (ESIA).

And yet, so far little is known about the document other than its basic dimensions—it contains 14 volumes, 11,000 pages, and 2.75 million words—and that British firm Environmental Resources Management (ERM) spent two years compiling it. Since receiving the long-awaited ESIA on May 31, authorities in Nicaragua have been mum’s the word, saying only that a special cross-sector committee headed by the Ministerio del Ambiente y los Recursos Naturales (MARENA) is considering the data and will communicate its conclusions in due time.

Opponents of the mammoth canal scheme point to the ESIA situation as the most egregious example to date of how secretive the government has been regarding the estimated US$50 billion project, which it has been pushing hard since President Daniel Ortega was re-elected in 2011 (NotiCen, Sept. 27, 2012).

"The worst is that nobody even knows who's in the cross-sector committee that they claim to have formed," Mónica López Baltodano, director of the pro-democracy organization Fundación Popol Na, told the independent news site Confidencial late last month. "They announced that it exists and that it's reviewing the impact studies, but we don't know who they are … It all seems like a fiction."

The Ortega administration’s handling of the matter also drew complaints from a panel of international experts who had a chance, back in March, to examine an early draft of the study during a gathering at Florida International University (FIU) in Miami, Florida. In a June 15 press release, the group chided the government for "holding [the ESIA] in secret." They also criticized the impact study itself, saying that ERM was rushed into producing an incomplete picture of the unprecedented endeavor. "Proceeding without an adequate assessment of the canal’s environmental, social, and economic impacts will prove disastrous for Nicaragua’s people and the region’s ecosystems," the panel warned.

Members of the group include Pedro Álvarez, a civil engineer at Rice University in Houston, Texas; Kimberly Williams-Guillén, director of conservation science at Paso Pacifico, an environmental organization with offices in both Nicaragua and California; and Jorge Huete-Pérez, a molecular biologist with Nicaragua’s Universidad Centroamericana (UCA).

The canal is slated to be deeper, wider, and significantly longer (278 km versus 77 km) than its Panamanian counterpart. More than one-third of the trajectory passes through Lago Cocibolca, also known as Lago de Nicaragua, Central America’s largest lake. Digging the canal will require the removal of an estimated 5 billion cubic meters of material—enough to bury San Francisco,
California, under a 136-foot layer of earth, the McClatchy news company’s Tim Johnson pointed out in a recent article.

The megaendeavor also includes various side projects, including two deepwater ports (one on each coast), an artificial lake, various roads and bridges, a tourist resort, a Pacific-side free-trade zone, an international airport, a power plant, and steel and cement factories (NotiCen, Oct. 23, 2014).

**Campesino protests**

The Ortega government and its Chinese partner in the project, the Hong Kong Nicaragua Development Group (HKND Group), defend the ambitious venture as being well-designed and environmentally sound. Upon officially receiving the ESIA, Telemaco Talavera, spokesperson for the Comisión del Gran Canal, the government board overseeing the project, said it proves the canal is "viable." Xu Changbao, the general manager of HKND’s Nicaragua office, said it demonstrates a serious commitment to the project.

In an exclusive interview last month with El Diario Nuevo, Australian engineer Bill Wild, HKND Group’s chief project advisor, heaped even more praise on the "immense" report, saying it shows that, if the company "manages to mitigate, control, and compensate for the impacts," the canal will have a "net positive effect." The ESIA, he said, also demonstrates that the company modified the projected route of the canal to avoid certain environmentally sensitive areas, including mangrove swamps near Brito, on the Pacific coast, and the San Miguelito wetlands, south of Lago Cocibolca. "What we did," said Wild, "was listen to what the people are saying and take their proposals into consideration."

Thousands of families living in the projected path of the canal argue otherwise. To date, residents in those areas—together with opposition lawmakers and activists from various civil-society organizations—have held approximately 50 demonstrations demanding among other things that the government repeal Ley 840, the concession law that the Sandinista-dominated legislature approved in 2013 giving the HKND Group exclusive rights, for the next 50 years, to build and operate the canal and use whatever land it deems necessary to carry out the project (NotiCen, Aug. 15, 2013).

The largest protest so far took place June 13 in Juigalpa, 140 km east of Managua. An estimated 15,000 people, mostly campesinos, turned out for the event. Many arrived in cattle trucks, according to journalist Wilfredo Miranda, who covered the protest for the online news service Fusion. Organizers told him that the government prohibited buses from transporting people to the march. Some demonstrators said that their cell phones were blocked and that prior to the event they received mysterious messages saying it had been canceled.

Skirmishes between FSLN loyalists and canal protestors caused a handful of injuries. But the demonstration did not involve the kind of crackdown that canal opponents experienced in late December, when police made dozens of arrests and, for several days afterward, kept a handful of organizers locked up incommunicado in the infamous Dirección de Auxilio Judicial prison, better known as El Chipote, in Managua (NotiCen, Feb. 5, 2015).

"Enough already with the abuses of this government. They want to do the same thing they did here in the 1980s: confiscate land from the campesinos," protester Leonard Barrera told Fusion. "Nicaragua has to demonstrate its bravery. As [Augusto César] Sandino said, ‘Nicaragua is for Nicaraguans.’"
Fear and uncertainty

In a separate piece, published last month by Confidencial, Wilfredo Miranda noted that, while some of the protestors are naturally opposed to Ortega, others have historically supported the president and his left-wing Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN). Now they feel that Ortega has sold them out.

"After being the best president for the poor, now he wants to take their land away," said Fátima Duarte, an alternate municipal council member with the FSLN in San Jorge, near the southwestern city of Riva. Duarte said that since coming out against the canal she is no longer allowed into the Sandinista-controlled town hall. "I can't go to sessions or meetings. ... I can't participate in anything," she said.

Government backers of the project say it will create tens of thousands of jobs, produce double-digit growth numbers and ultimately transform the impoverished country's economy. But residents along the canal's presumed path say the opposite is happening, that uncertainty regarding where and how the project will proceed has hampered economic activity.

People are reluctant to invest or build homes in the area for fear that the land will soon be expropriated, Miranda reported. Lenders refuse to extend credit. A big part of the problem, again, is lack of transparency by the government. Residents fear their land will be taken away but don’t know when, or where they will go afterward. Nor do they know how much HKND Group will pay for the properties. The big question is whether prices will be based on market values, as government officials have promised, or on land registry values (which tend to be undervalued), as spelled out in Ley 840.

"We're concerned about the people, the poor campesinos and the medium-scale producers in the zone affected by the project who live with anxiety and uncertainty," the Conferencia Episcopal de Nicaragua (CEN), the country's Catholic bishops conference, wrote in an open letter it distributed to the press in March.

"The firm determination of the people affected to defend their lands and national sovereignty, at all costs, could lead to unwanted armed conflicts," the church authorities went on to say. "This project would be good for the country only on the condition that serious and thorough scientific studies are done ensuring the ecological and economic viability of the work and that [the government and developers] act with due transparency and legality, that they provide the population with enough real information."

-- End --