

3-29-1989

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Recommended Citation

Tyroler, Deborah. "U.S. Accuses Panama Of Harassing Canal Employees." (1989). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/2877>

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U.S. Accuses Panama Of Harassing Canal Employees

by Deborah Tyroler

Category/Department: General

Published: Wednesday, March 29, 1989

On March 28, State Department spokesperson Margaret Tutwiler charged that the Panamanian government was harassing canal employees. In a March 27 statement, head of the Panama Canal Commission, William Gianelli, said that if the campaign of harassment continued, traffic through the waterway could be disrupted. Since the imposition of economic sanctions last year, US canal officials have said they intend to keep the facility open. Included among the sanctions are Washington's refusal to pay the Panamanian government income taxes withheld from canal employees' paychecks. That money is placed in an escrow account. In response, Panama has refused to issue 1989 license plates to employees, citing their failure to pay taxes. According to a 1977 treaty, the Canal Commission, comprised of five US officials and four Panamanians, is to run the canal until December 31, 1999, when Panama City will take possession of it. "We respect our treaty commitments and intend to meet our obligations to insure the canal's safe, efficient continued operation," Tutwiler said. (Basic data from AFP, 03/28/89)

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