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Salinas Administration Changes Terms Of Port Privatization

by Carlos Navarro

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President Carlos Salinas's administration has modified the privatization plan for the country's ports in order to limit private sector participation solely to new construction contracts and management of port services. The previous plan had called for the outright sale of the following government-owned harbor facilities: Acapulco, Guaymas, Lazaro Cardenas, Manzanillo, Mazatlan, Progreso-Yukaltepen, Istmo de Tehuantepec, Quintana Roo, Ensenada, and one undesignated port. Under the new government decree, published on June 2 in the official federal register, the ports per se will remain in the public domain, although concessions to operate port facilities will be open to the public, subject to approval by the Transportation Secretariat (Secretaria de Comunicaciones y Transporte, SCT). Operating concessions will be granted for a period of up to 50 years. The new regulations also encourage state governments to form port authorities in order to assume supervisory, planning, construction and operational activities. Three ports that had previously been opened for concessions to the private sector are all located on the Gulf of Mexico: Tampico and Altamira (both in Tamaulipas state), and Veracruz. In fact, the new regulations cite Veracruz as an example where concessions to the private sector have resulted in markedly improved services for users. Speculation abounds over potential Mexican investors interested in taking over services at some of the ports. For example, Alfredo Navarrete Fabries, secretary of the Union of Maritime and Land Stevedores (Union de Estibadores Maritimos y Terrestres) at Lazaro Cardenas port, told the government news service Notimex on June 12 that Grupo Villacero and Linea Mexicana del Pacifico have expressed interest in acquiring the Servicios Portuarios de Lazaro Cardenas (SERPOLAC) agency. However, Navarrete also expressed concern that the government's port privatization plan does not spell out the rights of port workers under the new scheme. According to Navarrete, in March the government had provided assurances to port workers that they will retain their jobs. (Sources: La Jornada, 06/02/93; Notimex, 06/10/93, 06/12/93, 06/13/93; El Financiero International, 06/14/93)

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