

8-29-2007

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### Recommended Citation

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## **Southeast Rail Ceases Operations; Central American Migrants Stranded**

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Mexico

Published: 2007-08-29

The decision of a private concessionaire to halt operations of a railroad serving southeastern Mexico had major repercussions for Central American emigrants trying to make their way to the US via Mexico. The Chiapas-Mayab rail, which suspended operations on July 25, offered cargo service to six southeastern states.

For almost two decades, Central American emigrants jumped on the railroad in communities in Tabasco and Chiapas, just a few miles from the border with Guatemala. But the decision by Compania Ferroviaria Chiapas-Mayab, a subsidiary of US-based railroad Genesee & Wyoming Inc. (GWI), caught many would-be migrants by surprise, stranding them in Mexico. GWI obtained a 30-year concession to the southeastern rail line in 1999 (see SourceMex, 1999-07-21). This was one of the final stages of ex-President Ernesto Zedillo's effort to turn over ownership of the state-run rail company Ferrocarriles Nacionales (FERRONALES) to the private sector (see SourceMex, 1995-05-03, 1995-11-22 and 1999-09-15).

As part of the concession, GWI gained the right to offer cargo service along the lucrative Merida-Campeche-Coatzacoalcos line. In addition, the US rail line obtained a special right of way on the route crossing the Isthmus of Tehuantepec from the port of Coatzacoalcos in Veracruz state to Salina Cruz in Oaxaca state. That route is operated by a state-run railway, the Ferrocarril del Istmo de Tehuantepec (FIT).

### ***Railroad cites financial losses, damaged infrastructure***

A second route operated by GWI connecting Ciudad Hidalgo in Chiapas, near the border with Guatemala, with Ciudad Ixtepec in Oaxaca state became largely inoperable in 2005, after Hurricane Stan destroyed a large portion of the infrastructure needed by the rail line, including more than 280 km of track and 70 bridges. Stan, a slow-moving hurricane, caused extensive damage in the southeast, especially areas near the coast of Chiapas (see SourceMex, 2005-10-12 and 2005-11-02).

Most of the infrastructure damage occurred along the stretch connecting Ciudad Hidalgo and Arriaga in Chiapas, forcing GWI and its subsidiary to suspend service along this portion of the route in 2005. The railroad developed alternative routes to haul cargo from the Guatemalan border, including La Mesilla-Comitan in Chiapas and Tenosique in Tabasco state. But the loss of the Ciudad Hidalgo-Arriaga stretch was difficult to overcome, with the rail line experiencing a reduction in the volume of cargo.

Unable to obtain any guarantees from the government that the infrastructure would be repaired, GWI declared bankruptcy for the operations of its Mexican subsidiary in June of this year, announcing that it would abandon the concession. "We could not continue to absorb these types of financial losses," said GWI president John Hellman, citing the continuing uncertainty regarding the

reconstruction in Chiapas and the decline in rail traffic for Compania Ferroviaria Chiapas-Mayab. At that time, Hellman announced that the subsidiary would be placed on the auction block. The Mexican government attempted to prevent GWI from suspending service so suddenly but was powerless to take any immediate action.

In a letter to the company in early July, the Secretaria de Comunicaciones y Transportes (SCT) warned that the sudden withdrawal would leave Mexico without service in a vast region of the country. The US company did not budge, and the Mexican government's only course of action was to seize all the assets of Merida-based Compania Ferroviaria Chiapas Mayab. This included 41 locomotives and 1,130 rail cars.

Some critics called GWI's decision "irresponsible," given its lavish promises at the time it received the concession. "When [the company] assumed a portion of the Mexican rail system, it promised that it would introduce advanced procedures for administration and operation," said syndicated columnist Miguel Angel Granados Chapas. "This was supposed to boost efficiency and improve customer service in the long run." Others said Compania Ferroviaria Chiapas-Mayab was partly responsible for its problems. "[The company] fell on hard times because of poor management, and there was no maintenance of tracks and locomotives," said Victor Morales Flores, secretary general of the Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores Ferrocarrileros de la Republica Mexicana (STFRM), who raised concerns about the fate of 1,200 workers employed by the railway.

President Felipe Calderon's administration has made contingency plans for the state-run FIT to eventually take over the more than 1,800 km of track abandoned by GWI. The government has promised that workers will be rehired. Given the state of the tracks in Chiapas, the FIT is most likely to assume operations for the Merida-Coatzacoalcos route. The SCT is projecting that the service between Ciudad Hidalgo and Arriaga could resume by the second half of 2008, after the infrastructure damaged by Stan has been rebuilt.

### *Decision caught Central American immigrants by surprise*

For many would-be immigrants from Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, GWI's decision to abandon the route from Ciudad Hidalgo to Ciudad Ixtepec made the trek north more difficult. A number of Central Americans were reported to be walking more than 260 km from the Guatemalan border to Ixtepec, just so they could catch the train in Oaxaca state. "They were arriving sick, dehydrated, and with sores on their feet," said Alejandro Solalinde Guerra, who manages the Casa del Migrante in Oaxaca.

When GWI suddenly decided to suspend in July, Central American immigrants lost their principal means of transportation to Veracruz and other points en route to the US. "Information from local authorities and human rights advocates suggests that at least 3,000 undocumented immigrants from Central America are congregated along the length of the tracks in Tabasco, Chiapas, and Oaxaca, in the hope that the cargo trains will resume service," the Villahermosa daily newspaper Tabasco Hoy said on Aug. 15.

As it turns out, the initial count of 3,000 was understated. Authorities estimate that at least 7,000 Central American immigrants became stranded after GWI halted cargo service. "Unaware that the

railroad had ceased operations, Central American migrants continued to pour into the communities where it was customary to jump on the train," said Granados Chapa. "Many would risk their lives, jumping on the roof or hanging from the ladder of rail cars." The concentration of Central American immigrants began to tax local communities, forcing federal authorities to intervene.

The Instituto Nacional de Migracion (INM), with assistance from law-enforcement authorities, detained a large number of the immigrants, placing them in a makeshift camp in Tabasco. "The INM continues its deportations, even though many of the migrants are refusing to return to their country," said the Mexico City daily newspaper La Jornada. "In response, the Mexican army and the federal police have embarked on a violent operation, which has resulted in the wounding of an individual, the destruction of makeshift homes, and the theft of property of migrants."

Authorities said about 350 of the stranded immigrants ultimately agreed to return voluntarily to their home countries, under a program negotiated by the governments of Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Mexico. Rounding up the Central Americans did little to dispel the notion that Mexico mistreats undocumented immigrants in much the same way as the US.

There have been numerous complaints that the Mexican government through the years has done little to protect undocumented immigrants from attacks perpetrated by Mexican and Central American gangs and even police in Mexican territory.

The latest incident prompted human rights advocates to renew requests to authorities to respect the human rights of the undocumented Central Americans. "The federal government and local authorities have the responsibility to comply with international treaties on human rights, especially when it comes to migration," said Samuel Gonzalez Ruiz, a former regional UN advisor on human rights.

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