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## **U.S. Relinquishes Canal, but Panama Faces Problems**

by LADB Staff

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The US turned over the canal to Panama on Dec. 31 an event that the Panamanian government said was a boost to Panama's economic future and to the consolidation of its sovereignty. Nevertheless, the US departure leaves President Mireya Moscoso's administration with nagging problems that include maintaining canal security, decontaminating former US military bases, and keeping profits from the waterway and the old bases free of political interference.

In a midnight ceremony Dec. 31, US officials turned the canal over to Panama under terms of the 1977 Torrijos-Carter Treaties. US Army Secretary Louis Caldera gave a speech and Moscoso read a note from the US formally relinquishing the canal. She then said "the canal belongs to Panamanians." The canal's Maritime Traffic Office said ships were passing through the waterway without any problems caused by computer glitches despite time differences between ships' clocks and the canal.

Greenpeace and other environmental organizations worried about environmental security as the first ship carrying nuclear waste entered the canal. But the canal authority (Autoridad del Canal de Panama, ACP) said its policy was to increase security whenever ships bearing toxic or nuclear waste traversed the waterway. ACP spent US\$4 million on contingency plans to ensure there would be no hitches the first day of Panamanian control.

Despite the smooth transition, Panama faces problems related to the canal and the former US military bases. Among them are uncertainty about whether there is sufficient political will to isolate the canal from partisan politics and official corruption. During the administration of former President Ernesto Perez Balladares (1994-1999), the opposition accused him of planning to turn the canal into a job bank for relatives and political cronies and to use canal profits to bankroll his Partido Revolucionario Democratico (PRD).

During transfer ceremonies earlier in December, (see NotiCen, 1999-12-16), Moscoso promised that the ACP would manage the canal "free of political interests." On the final day of US ownership, leaders of seven political parties in the Legislative Assembly signed a pact placing the canal outside the political arena. "We promise to treat all canal affairs as affairs of state; we will maintain the canal and the reverted areas outside of partisan politics," said the pact. "We support all policies aimed at promoting the full development of the canal and the conversion of the adjacent areas into projects that serve as a basis for the sustainable economic development of the country."

### ***US leaves contaminated bases to Panama***

A more immediate issue is the contamination of reverted bases. In the years leading up to the transfer, Panama had increasingly complained that the US was paying too little attention to cleaning up dumps and firing ranges, some of them contaminated with toxic substances, residues from chemical weapons, and unexploded munitions (see NotiCen, 1997-07-17). In its final report on the

bases, the Defense Department said there were 105,000 unexploded munitions in three of the bases, but some observers said the figure was too low. On Dec. 28, Foreign Minister Jose Miguel Aleman said he had sent a delegation to Washington headed by Ambassador Guillermo Ford to renegotiate base decontamination with the State Department. However, no new negotiations have taken place and President Bill Clinton rebuffed Moscoso's efforts in an October trip to Washington to get a commitment on decontamination.

The US maintains its longstanding position that it has done all it needs to do under existing agreements. The Defense Department has consistently said that it has adhered to the wording of the Torrijos-Carter Treaties, which require only that the US "take all measures to ensure, insofar as may be practicable, that every hazard to human life, health, and safety is removed" (see NotiCen, 1998-11-19).

Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Susan Wood said the US would cooperate in a plan to solve the problem but made it clear that no change in the US position was under consideration. Furthermore, US officials said US Ambassador to Panama Simon Ferro told Ford that more preparation was needed before the issue could be addressed. The word "preparation" apparently meant that Panama had not yet presented a strong enough case for negotiating additional cleanup efforts.

The US has questioned the authenticity of photographs submitted by Panama showing munitions scattered about the former firing ranges. Wood said the US was willing to examine any proof that the US military had not met its obligation to decontaminate the bases "insofar as may be practicable." "We have always said a small portion of the ranges would have to remain off-limits to people because cleaning them up was not practical or even possible in some cases," Wood said.

The statement reflects the Defense Department view that any additional cleanup would be too costly and in some cases would require such extensive intervention in forested areas that it would cause environmental damage. Secretary Albright discusses decontamination during visit In a mid-January visit to Panama, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright appeared to soften the US position on base contamination by promising to send a technical commission to Panama to examine the bases. The commission would include representatives of the State, Defense, and Energy Departments and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). No date was given for the mission.

Albright met with Moscoso Jan. 14 and had what was described as an amicable conversation, and, although no details were released, unofficial sources said base decontamination was discussed. Albright's presence in Panama was taken as a sign that Washington was willing to discuss the issue since both Moscoso and Albright said the purpose of the talks was to begin a new bilateral relationship between the two countries. Coincidental to the secretary's visit, Foreign Minister Aleman said two new areas containing munitions dumps had been discovered. He said US officials should visit the sites "to see with their own eyes the degree of contamination."

Juan Mendez, director of the Foreign Ministry's office of treaty affairs, said the US was hiding behind the word "practicable" to avoid a costly cleanup. "We do not want money or compensation," he said. "We want the ranges clean." Meanwhile a report from the Ministry of Health says that

accidents leading to injuries and deaths have occurred in 17 communities near the contaminated sites. Moscoso faces political attacks on security issue Another issue facing Panama is canal security.

Moscoso's reassurances that the national-security plan for the canal will protect it from terrorists and foreign invasion have not reassured everyone. One complaint is that any such plan depends on unwanted US cooperation. US National Security Council official Arturo Valenzuela said in January that the US was interested in discussing closer cooperation on canal security.

In an interview with the daily El Panama America, Valenzuela said the US looked forward to better relations with Moscoso than it had with former President Perez Balladares. While proposed talks in Washington could resolve both the base-contamination and canal-security issues, Moscoso's critics say Panama is in danger of letting the US military back into the country under the guise of protecting the canal and cleaning up the bases.

Francisco Sanchez Cardenas, former PRD secretary general, recently attacked the administration for permitting US military aircraft bound for Colombia to refuel in Panama. He charged that the permission was the product of a secret agreement with the US, that it weakened the sovereignty of Panama's neighbors, and that the US was using the agreement to continue its efforts to establish a narcotics-interdiction base in Panama. (Sources: Notimex, 12/30/99, 12/31/99; The Washington Post, 01/10/00, 01/16/00; El Panama America, 12/30/99, 12/31/99, 01/02/00, 01/10/00, 01/12/00, 01/13/00, 01/17/00)

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