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## **Mismanagement, Other Factors Threaten Central American Water Supplies**

*by Guest*

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[The following article by Paul Jeffrey is reproduced with permission of Noticias Aliadas in Lima, Peru. It first appeared in the Oct. 30, 2000, issue of Latinamerica Press.]

When Rosa Coca gave permission to his neighbors to run a water pipe to acquire clean drinking water from a spring on his land, his children objected. They wanted the water for use on a coffee farm, but were unable to dissuade their aging father from sharing with the other residents of San Antonio, a small village that clings to the last kilometer of Honduran soil before the steep western mountains drop into the Lempa River on the border with El Salvador. For years, San Antonio's families had drawn water from small streams flowing through their community, but increasing deforestation uphill and unchecked pesticide use by area farmers had made surface water scarcer and dirtier. In 1999, with Coca's permission, the villagers started digging trenches and installing pipe.

Last November, when more than two dozen community members were digging the foundation for a water tank, about a dozen Cocas showed up. Gloria Minta, a local Catholic activist, said the group, armed with handguns and machetes, threatened to kill the villagers if they continued work. Worried about the possibility of violence, Minta and other villagers had alerted local police. After a scuffle, five Cocas were arrested. Their case is pending in a court in Nueva Ocotepeque, the provincial capital. Such fights are becoming increasingly common throughout Central America. After decades in which the struggle over land was the most dramatic battle for the rural poor, in this new millennium the most critical issue will be water. Fifteen million of Central America's 40 million people have no access to potable water.

More than two-thirds of the region's rivers are heavily contaminated by agricultural chemicals, coffee-processing waste, untreated sewage, and unregulated mining operations. A recent study by the UN Development Program (UNDP) and the European Union (EU) warned that "the degradation and loss of hydrological resources in Central America is beginning to limit the quality of life" and development options. In El Salvador, the water table is dropping by a meter a year, and development experts warn of impending "water stress" in San Salvador, particularly if environmentalists lose their battle to preserve the El Espino natural reserve, whose aquifer holds one-sixth of the country's renewable water supply, from developers.

In Managua, as many as 200,000 people have informally connected their homes to the city water system, creating a chaotic disarray of leaking pipes. In Guatemala City, 40% of fresh water piped into the capital is lost from leaky pipes. In Panama, deforestation has radically reduced the amount of water flowing into the Panama Canal. In southern Honduras, failure to replenish aquifers has led to salinization of well water. In Costa Rica, nitrate contamination from pesticide use in the Virilla

watershed, from which San Jose gets its water, is a leading suspect in the city's abnormally high rate of stomach cancer.

### *Two views on water are in competition*

Organizations such as the World Bank have generally treated water as an economic commodity and promoted privatization, while grassroots groups and UN organizations usually take a rights-based approach. Central America is a battleground for the two concepts. With coaching from the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), officials of San Pedro Sula, Honduras' second-largest city, signed a contract Oct. 7 handing over their water and sewage system to the Italian firm ACEA, which manages Rome's waterworks. No other concessions are on the horizon. "We're such a basket case that no one would want to buy any of the systems," said Tony Brand, coordinator of the UN-sponsored Regional Network of Water and Sanitation of Central America.

In Honduras, the possibility of privatization increased with the Concessions Law passed by Congress in a desperate effort to step up foreign investment after Hurricane Mitch in 1998. While there are some municipally owned systems, most are still operated by the government's National Autonomous Service of Aqueducts and Sewers (SANAA).

A proposed water law would create a hybrid solution, providing incentives for municipal control while reserving a role for SANAA in monitoring and providing technical assistance. The debate was triggered by Hurricane Mitch, during which 48 of Honduras' 50 largest towns lost at least part of their water and sanitation systems and almost half the country's 4,066 rural piped water systems were knocked out.

For weeks, SANAA was unable to respond to requests from distant communities. Rural municipalities were left on their own to solve their water problems, and people began to see water systems as a municipal responsibility, with national government assistance when resources are available, Brand said. Mitch's lesson about the vulnerability of watersheds may be harder to learn.

Because water shortages and contamination often stem from sources in another jurisdiction, experts like Brand argue for less concern over political boundaries and greater attention to watershed management, which is difficult in Central America, where 23 major watersheds covering an area of 191,000 sq km, more than any of the individual countries belong to two or more nations.

Without international coordination of watershed management, Central America will face increasingly severe droughts during the dry season and more dangerous floods during the rainy season. Norma Elisa Mejia, program director for the Christian Development Commission in Honduras, said the same is true locally.

"One of the lessons of Mitch is that it doesn't matter if my plot is reforested and well taken care of if all around me the micro-watershed is naked and unprotected," she said. "Our task is no longer just to help campesinos care for their own land, but to look beyond their property borders at the whole environment." Mejia said most nongovernmental organizations are focusing more on watershed management and conflict resolution. "If you talk about watershed management today, you're inevitably going to have to deal with conflict," Mejia said.

That approach is markedly different from the classic "latrine and water" approach of many development projects, which focused exclusively on infrastructure and resulted in water systems that failed from lack of community involvement in maintenance, and latrines that were never used because the decision to install them had been made by urban project managers rather than community members.

Regional governments were often the worst offenders, using social-investment funds to hastily install latrines with considerable partisan political fanfare but no involvement of local residents. Although development experts do not expect government bureaucracies to retool their approach, they are more hopeful about rural grassroots organizations.

"Campesino movements in this country have historically demanded land, but they're slowly coming to see that land without water is land without life," Mejia said. "There are lots of campesino groups that have struggled for and won land, but if they don't have water they can't move beyond subsistence agriculture. So, it's time that they started demanding both land and water. The two must be linked."

In San Antonio, where the new water project was dedicated in May despite the Cocas' opposition, Gloria Minta said villagers are determined to protect the water that has changed their lives. "Before, we suffered for days without water," she said. "That helped us appreciate what we have now. Water is life. So now we're going to plant trees and do a better job of caring for the watershed. We had to work hard to get good water in our homes, and we're willing to work hard to keep it."

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