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UN Ranks Central America Low on HDI

by LADB Staff

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The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) Human Development Report for 2001 ranked Central American countries far down on the list of 162 countries rated. All except Costa Rica fell into the classification of countries with a medium level of human development. The Human Development Index (HDI) attempts to assess levels of human development using three major indicators: life expectancy, educational attainment, and per capita GDP. The assessment also includes such indicators as educational attainment, poverty, and income distribution. The yearly reports are based on data collected two years earlier. The 2001 report reflects data from 1999.

In the 2001 report, released July 11, Costa Rica ranked 41st and was the only Central American country to fall into the category of "high human development." It was second only to Chile (39th) among Latin American countries. At the other extreme was Guatemala in 108th place, second to last of all nations in the hemisphere. Last was Haiti in 134th place. Norway headed the list; the US was in sixth place. Government leaders had little to say about the national rankings. However, in Guatemala, the report coincided with a long-running political debate on taxes.

A government spokesperson said Guatemala's 108th-place ranking (up from 120th in the 2000 report) was a result of its tax revenues, which are lower than in neighboring countries. Leonel Soto Arango of the governing Frente Republicano Guatemalteco (FRG) took the occasion to urge passage of a pending tax bill. "You can't have development if you don't demand a thorough reform of the tax system," he said.

The UNDP report said El Salvador's 95th-place ranking was worse than it might have been because of the earthquakes in January and February, which set the country's economic development back by three years. Besides the earthquakes, El Salvador's performance was hurt by a low rate of tax collection and meager spending on social programs. Selected data on human development in Central America

Country	life expectancy	adult literacy	GDP per capita	Rank at birth (years)	(% age 15 & above)
Costa Rica	76.2	95.5	8,860	41	
Guatemala	64.5	68.1	3,674	108	
Honduras	65.7	74.0	2,340	107	
Nicaragua	68.1	68.2	2,279	106	
El Salvador	69.5	78.3	4,344	95	
Panama	73.9	91.7	5,875	52	

(Source: UNDP Human Development Report 2001)

Cuba was not included on the index because of incomplete data. However, the UNDP reported Cuba's life expectancy at 75.9 years and its adult literacy rate at 97%. By comparison with Central America, Cuba would have ranked between 50 and 51 on the index, the report said.

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