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Panama Declares State of Emergency

by LADB Staff

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The government of President Mireya Moscoso has declared a state of emergency in the zones (comarcas) of heaviest indigenous population to deal with poverty levels that are far above the national average. Moscoso made the declaration during an Aug. 4 meeting with Cabinet members held in the Ngobe-Bugle community of Quebrada del Guabo, in Chiriqui province. The declaration resulted from a request by Indian legislator Deputy Enrique Montezuma. The three major indigenous groups are the Ngobe-Bugle, Kuna, and Embera. The three make up 8% of Panama's 2.8 million population. Moscoso said 60% of the Ngobe-Bugle including 95% of the children live in poverty in the western provinces of Chiriqui, Bocas del Toro, and Veraguas.

Along with the state of emergency, Moscoso appointed a commission to oversee programs to address the social and economic deficits that afflict the major indigenous comarcas. The commission will include the ministers of health, economy and finance, education, and agricultural development as well as leaders of the Consejo Nacional de Desarrollo Indigena. Minister of Interior and Justice Winston Spadafora said the commission would see that all government departments turn their attention to the comarcas and give priority to projects the communities require.

The declaration permits the comarcas to receive special attention that includes credits for economic development, construction of new secondary schools, improvements in public transportation, and funds to build a center for cultural exchanges with international indigenous organizations. Spadafora also promised training for comarca police at the national police academy and the marking of comarca boundaries paid for with funds from the World Bank.

A report by the Economy and Finance Ministry said 37% of Panama's population lives in poverty. The report is based on a national study funded by the government, the World Bank, and other international organizations.

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