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Miss Universe, the movie star
(Image courtesy of elcaribe.com.do)

Air controller impasse

Air controllers and the government are at war, with the impasse affecting the operation of airports yesterday at the moment of the morning shift changeover. The government called in military air controllers, who worked with those who chose to stay on the job, and made plans to bring in controllers from abroad. Diario Libre mentions that the plan is to bring in Chilean and Mexican air controllers, but points out that this cost would be considerably more than what the local controllers are demanding.

President Mejia yesterday authorized the Civil Aviation Board director, Carlos Alvarez Guzman, to take any measures necessary to guarantee the safety of air travelers. As per Decree 264-04, President Mejia authorized the hiring of national and foreign air navigation technicians. Yesterday, Bolivar de Leon, the president of the Association of Air Controllers, told El Caribe reporters that the government has not asked them to sit down to talks. He said that they had not convened a work stoppage for yesterday when military air controllers replaced them at their posts. Today, however, sources indicate that they have asked Frank Rainieri of Punta Cana to serve as mediator.

The air controllers are again demanding a 100% wage increase, which would amount to a total of RD\$9 million more a month. The air controllers allege they are making less than US\$1,000 per month while their colleagues in the US make at least US\$5,000 a month for similar work. They argue that their occupation is very stressful and taxing, on top of requiring years of highly-specialized training. Furthermore, there are no local replacements available.

As reported in Hoy newspaper, Alvarez Guzman explained that a year and a half ago the controllers earned approximately RD\$16,000 a month. These wages were increased to a range of RD\$30,000 to RD\$38,000. He said that as president of the association, de Leon earns about RD\$50,000 per month. While the air controllers work in privatized airports, their wages are paid by the Dominican government. The operation of private airports in the Dominican Republic is known to be very lucrative, and the airports pay large sums to the government in taxes. Aviation sources say the air

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lucrative, and the airports pay large sums to the government in taxes. Aviation sources say the air controllers also receive under-the-table subsidies from the private airport operators. Likewise, sources say that air controllers work three days and get four off to compensate for the stress. The government says that due to the restrictions in place after the signing of the agreement with the IMF, it cannot again increase the wages. To confront the protest of the air controllers, the government called its own military technicians. This has delayed several landings, however as flights are being spaced out to one every half hour, when normally up to 10 airplanes can land at the same time.

Yesterday, the association of pilots of the Dominican Republic announced it was striking in sympathy with the air controllers. A source at Punta Cana's airport says that this is a bonus in disguise, as it reduces the number of domestic flights and thus the work load of the controllers while the situation is being resolved.

Diario Libre reports that while the government says there is no money to meet the demands of the air controllers for wage increases, funds that could have been used have been transferred to a social fund. The move coincides with the final weeks of the Mejia re-election campaign. The newspaper highlights that on 3 March, the Civil Aviation Board agreed to transfer RD\$6 million a month of the funds generated by the organization through airport fees to the Comision Presidencial de Apoyo al Desarrollo Barrial. The money would be diverted from the special fund that was created in April 2001 by Decree 461.

As reported in Hoy, Ellis Perez, the spokesman for Aerodom which operates the Las Americas and Puerto Plata airports, urged an end to the impasse. He said the DR cannot risk doing anything to affect the flow of visitors to the country.

Penn, Schoen & Berland March poll

Penn, Schoen & Berland polling company released yesterday the results of its 17-24 March poll of 1,201 eligible voters. When asked for whom they would vote, on the day of the poll 63% of those questioned answered they would support former President Leonel Fernandez. The PLD candidate dropped two points since an earlier poll held 21-24 January. His closest competition, President Hipolito Mejia (PRD), would receive 19% of the vote (up from 13% in February), while Eduardo Estrella (PRSC) is ranked with 16% of the vote (no change from February). The Penn, Schoen & Berland poll shows that only 2% of voters have not yet decided for whom to cast their ballot in the first round.

In the event that no candidate receives the necessary 50%+1 majority in a first round of voting on 16 May, Fernandez is also predicted to win a second round. The polling company says that in a Mejia-Fernandez showdown, Fernandez would defeat Mejia 67% to 23%, with the undecided representing 9%. In case of a Fernandez-Estrella face-off, the vote would be split Fernandez 64% versus Estrella 27%, with 8% of voters as of yet undecided.

Upon releasing the results, Marcela Berland said the company could carry out two more polls, one at the end of April and another at the nearest date to the election.

As reported in Hoy newspaper, Berland said that it would be a "miracle" if there is a need for a second round.

The poll comes on the heels of a 20-23 March Hamilton Beattie & Staff poll that showed Fernandez winning in the first round with 52% versus 25% for Mejia and 17% for Estrella.

The results of the poll are published in full-page advertisements in local newspapers today. The reputable independent polling company did not reveal who had paid for its research. In the past, El Caribe newspaper has provided for the service, but chose not to do so this time around.

Politician popularity

According to Penn, Schoen & Berland, Fernandez is the most popular politician in the country, with a 71% popularity rate, down 5% from a February poll. Mejia is viewed favorably by 22% of those polled in March, while 77% have a negative opinion of the statesman. His positive rating increased 9% from the 21-24 January poll, when he was seen favorably by only 13% of those surveyed. Estrella received a 47% favorable image rating, and a 48% negative image rating.

Regarding the Vice-Presidential candidates, Penn, Schoen & Berland says that Rafael Alburquerque of the PLD has the highest positive rating with 38%, versus a negative 49%; Jose Hazim of the PRSC is seen as favorable by 29% of those polled, versus 60% who see him negatively; while Rafael Subervi of the PRD gets a 26% favorable rating and a 71% negative rating.

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How are we doing?

When pollsters Penn, Schoen & Berland asked Dominicans if the country was on the right track, 84% said it was headed in the wrong direction, and only 14% believe things are on the right track. The poll revealed that 83% do not agree with President Mejia's statement that the crisis is over, including 69% that strongly disagree. Only 16% say they agree or somewhat agree with the statement.

If they did it, so can we

Controversy continues over the use of state-owned "guaguas" or public busses for transportation in the campaign of President Mejia. The director of the OMSA public bus transport company said that this has been a common practice for the past 12 years. "If they can do it, why can't we," argued Diogenes Castillo. He told Hoy newspaper that just because there is a white flag supporting Mejia flying out of the bus does not mean that the campaign is using government resources for its purposes. He argued that the buses are being lent out to all parties. Nevertheless, opposition party spokesmen have been those raising the alert of the use of the busses for politics.

Monsignor Agripino Nunez, the country's leading political arbiter, lamented that the public at large should suffer due to scarcities in fuel with transportation restrictions while politicians are parading their supporters around in large caravans. He further criticized the OMSA staff for bragging about using these means to look good in front of their leader (Mejia) and his supporters.

Improved outlook for election

Alfonso Abreu Collado, the general co-ordinator for the Participacion Ciudadana civic movement that monitors elections in the Dominican Republic, said that the outlook for the 16 May election is now brighter than before, although more work is still needed to improve the security of the computerized systems, according to him. During an interview with Hoy newspaper, Abreu said that no one can guarantee absolutely there will not be any attempts at fraud, however. He criticized the government use of state-intervened media to promote the re-election of President Mejia. He disagreed with the suggestion from the PLD that the Central Electoral Board (JCE) administer the media confiscated following the collapse of the Baninter finance and media group.

Blackmail and abuse of money

As reported in Diario Libre, a brief presented by the attorneys representing the former head of the failed Baninter finance and media emporium shows that the confrontation that led to the bank's collapse began in earnest early in 2002. According to the legal case presented by the Castillo law firm, in April 2002, President Hipolito Mejia and Ramon Baez Figueroa exchanged these comments: "I will close the bank and have you arrested," Mejia would have said to Baez. Baez purportedly responded, "And I will knock you out of power," alluding to the strength of Baninter funds and its media.

In a lawsuit presented by the banker's defense team against the chief of President Mejia's re-election campaign, Eligio Jaquez, and National Treasurer Pastora Mendez de Fondeur, as well as official pollster Ana Maria Acevedo, what had been commonly rumored is now being brought to the public limelight. The defense lawyers presented evidence of a receipt without any identification for RD\$15 million signed by Jaquez, Mendez and Acevedo, and bank operations vice-president Marcos Baez Cocco. The lawyers say they will file another suit against another key PPH figurehead, Hernani Salazar, who they say received double that amount at a time when PPH proponents were pushing for the congressional action that would change the Constitution to allow re-election.

The lawyers argue that as of April 2002 a campaign began to discredit the bank, which the government supposedly took advantage of to garner extra funds for its political purposes. The lawsuit indicates that bank president Baez Figueroa was under severe pressure not to press charges against the former head of the security corps of President Mejia, Colonel Pedro Julia (Baez) Colon, in

against the former head of the security corps of President Mejia, Colonel Pedro Julio (Pepe) Goico, in whose name and two of his relatives, Baninter credit cards were issued to supposedly cover the official expenses of President Mejia while abroad. The lawyers claim that Baez was a victim of government blackmail, where loans were in reality forced contributions to facilitate the modification of the Constitution.

5.3 earthquake in Santo Domingo

Two earthquakes shook the country yesterday leaving no injuries or measurable damage. The first, with a magnitude of 4.6 on the Richter scale, occurred at 2:30 pm and was felt in Santiago. The epicenter was located near the community of Nagua. At 8:04 pm, residents on the south side of the island, including Santo Domingo, felt a slightly stronger quake -- 5.3 on the Richter scale. The epicenter of the second quake was said to be between Yamasa and Bonao.

Interestingly, last night's earthquake here in the DR was accurately predicted by Dr. Zhonghao Shou, a Chinese scientist who forecasts earthquakes with the observation of "earthquake clouds", as reported on the DR1 Weather & Beyond Forum.

See <http://www.dr1.com/forums/forumdisplay.php?f=34>

Shou's prediction was in location, time frame, and magnitude 100% correct, according to the report.

Shou's theory is that clouds are useful in predicting earthquakes for three reasons. First, as the cloud's tail points toward the position of the fault, it is possible to locate the epicenter. Second, the size of the cloud reflects the pressure around the fault, and can serve as an indicator of the magnitude of the impending earthquake. Finally, since an earthquake generally occurs within 49 days of the first appearance of the cloud, the time of the earthquake can be estimated.

See <http://quake.exit.com/A991003.html>

Tom Peters on the DR

US management expert Tom Peters, of "In Search of Excellence" fame, was in Santo Domingo this week where he gave a talk. As reported in Hoy newspaper today, he said that any advantages to be had by the Dominican Republic from the Free Trade Agreement signed with the United States will depend on whether or not Dominicans are able to produce items that interest US consumers. Peters' stay in the country is under the invitation of the Banco Leon. He told the press that the key is to find which areas yield the greatest competitive edge, and cited the case of Thailand apparel producers who lost market to the lower cost production of China. To survive, Thai producers have concentrated instead on unique artisanal products with much success. He also mentioned several success stories in India, where people who used to repair bicycles are now repairing complicated high-tech German machinery used to manufacture rugs. He concluded that the success of Dominicans in an open market will depend on their capacity to invent and identify areas and products with which we can be truly competitive. Finally, he urged Dominicans to increase the value addition on raw export products to enable DR to compete on the global market for more foreign exchange.

Miss Universe, the movie star

El Caribe reports that Miss Universe, Dominican Amelia Vega, has been asked to star in a movie after her reign ends. While she gave no details about the project, she said the offer has come from a foreign company. Vega's acting career began in a soap opera filmed in Miami and which co-starred Maria Celeste Arraras.

In addition to her duties as Miss Universe, Vega is also busy with her musical career. She is presently finishing up the recording of a CD on which her uncle, Latin contemporary star Juan Luis Guerra, is collaborating and on which she has written some of the songs.

Vega will surrender her Miss Dominican Republic crown this Saturday, 3 April at an event at the Palacio de los Deportes. She says that after her stint as Miss Universe she will reside in both Miami and Santo Domingo and plans to devote herself to helping Dominican children, not just those with AIDS but with other illnesses as well. "I believe I have not dedicated the time they require and will work more closely with them," she said.

In an interview with Hoy newspaper, she said that what she values most from her year as Miss Universe, which comes to an end 1 June 2004, is the warmth she has received from people all around the world.

around the world.

"I will continue being Amelia Vega, Miss Universe 2003, and the singer that was formerly Miss Universe, the actress that was formerly Miss Universe. I will open my wings to a new world," she told the newspaper.

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