

ACONGO meets Canadian NGOs and Robert Kennedy, Jr.

Jamillah Vasquez, the Executive Director of the Belize Alliance of Conservation NGOs, (BACONGO), along with her energy consultant, Ambrose Tillett, a former senior planner of BEL, Sharon Matola, Director of The Belize Zoo and Tropical Education Centre, joined officials from the Sierra Club, Probe International, the Natural Resources Defence Council, and Environmental Attorney Robert Kennedy, Jr. to present information to the Canadian officials about the proposed Fortis/BEL Chalillo Dam.

The event, sponsored by Probe International, also extended an invitation to participation to Fortis Inc officials. However, Fortis Inc declined to participate. The economic and environmental aspects of the proposed Chalillo Dam were addressed, and all partici-



(L-R) Ambrose Tillett BACONGO consultant, Sharon Matola Direct Belize Zoo, Jamillah Vasquez Executive Director of BACONGO and Robert Kennedy Jr Senior Attorney NRDY

pants answered questions from the press.

When queried about local opposition to the hydro project, it was noted that over 500 signatures from the Maya had been gathered, protesting the flooding of cultural sites minus any documentation. Also noted was the data made available in the project's EIA. Their own survey showed that 80 percent of the people sampled opposed the Chalillo Dam project.

Brought to light, too, was a recently released analysis from the International Union for the Conservation of Nature which dismissed Fortis/BEL's claim that Chalillo would be beneficial for flood control. This same report also states that the amount of energy produced from Chalillo would not make Belize independent from Mexico.

BACONGO demonstration - A huge success



Approximately 400 people turned out to oppose the proposed Chalillo Dam last Tuesday in the nation's capital, Belmopan. This was the largest protest ever to be held in Belmopan. Participants came to voice specific concerns. Those from the north were cane farmers and spoke out for co-generation with bagasse before Chalillo should be considered. The south was represented by Maya who object to the

...ing and depend upon the macal river.

BACONGO consultant and former Senior Energy Planner for BEL, Ambrose Tillett noted that "Belizeans can't afford electricity from Fortis as it is. This dam will only make things worse. Cheaper sources of electricity are available, but Fortis makes more money if the cost of electricity is higher".

Jamillah Vasquez, the Executive Director of BACONGO, spoke out to emphasize the important natural heritage found in the threatened river valley. Tony Gare, Chair of BACONGO, specifically wanted people to be aware that, "We are here to demonstrate against Chalillo, not the Government of Belize".

After people spoke about their concerns in Independence Park, the crowd marched to the main Administration Building. Signs were displayed noting "Bagasse Before Chalillo" and "Save our River" and "Fortis Forget It". Upon reaching the government building, a group of pro-Chalillo demonstrators awaited. The Prime Minister spoke, supporting Chalillo Dam and hoping that he could "influence the NEAC decision" to approve the project's Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA).

BACONGO would like to draw the public's attention to the fact that the NEAC decision does not mean that the Chalillo Dam will go forward. This issue is one where the people of Belize have no say in the decision-making for the Chalillo project. The decision to proceed or halt the project will ultimately be made in Canada, not in Belize.



Another element of the debate involves foreign ownership of our country's only energy utility. Foreign interests occur in most countries. However, when foreign companies create a situation where the economic and environmental aspects work to weaken a nation, then opposition should strongly be voiced. Independent financial analysis of the Chalillo project firmly state the downfalls. Chalillo Dam would not decrease our electricity rates. The International Union for the Conservation of Nature, IUCN as well as the Natural History Museum, London, also reveal the adverse profile of the proposed Chalillo Dam.

Last week's demonstration opposing Chalillo was a healthy show of sincere concern about this project. All involved believe that the project is good for Fortis, but bad for Belize.