

HydroMaya manager says he has no hidden agenda

By Nigel Avilez

Reporter News Editor

1999 will perhaps not be remembered as a good year for hydroelectricity projects in Belize.

With the Chalillo dam project facing tremendous opposition in the Cayo District, another hydro project, this time, in San Miguel, Toledo, is battling opposition from Maya villagers who feel that their lands are being taken away to be sold to "wealthy American investors."

Last Saturday when Prime Minister Said Musa visited Big Falls village to promote Government's initiatives and to listen to concerns of the Mayas in Toledo district, approximately 25 San Miguel residents demonstrated with placards against "the sale" of 250 acres of San Miguel land to HydroMaya for the Rio Grande Hydroelectric project.

ern Belize and, while he is not yet a Belizean, his only intention is to live and work in Belize. "We have no hidden agenda," he said.

Addressing questions of the project's environmental impact, Tippetts said that an environmental impact assessment has been conducted on the hydro project and it has received clearance from the department of environment.

In response to criticisms from people of San Miguel that they were not consulted on the decision to lease land to Hydro Maya, Tippetts said that his company has met with the villagers at least five different times in about four years to discuss their views on the project.

As recently as last November, he said, HydroMaya, Minister Briceno, Rural Development Minister Marcial Mes, and Ministry of Works Chief Engineer



San Miguel villager Angela Coh warns Prime Minister Said Musa that decisions made now about a hydro project will affect the Mayas in her village for years to come.

HydroMaya, is a Belize-registered company, which is being managed by American Mark Tippetts and partner Ted Sorenson. The company hopes to start supplying electricity needs for the Toledo, from Big Falls to Punta Gorda to San Antonio, by June 2001.

Prime Minister Musa responded to protestors Saturday by assuring villagers that no land was being sold to HydroMaya. Rather the 250 acres, reduced from 500 acres, were being leased to HydroMaya, in the name of San Miguel villagers, he said.

Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Natural Resources, Johnny Briceno, after meeting with San Miguel villagers last Saturday, said that the vast majority of residents, about 100 of 125, were in favour of the project, as long as the land was used only for the project.

"The core of the opposition is that there are fears that we have some kind of hidden agenda," Tippetts told Reporter. "They (San Miguel protestors) fear that HydroMaya is getting the land under the pretense of a hydro project."

Tippetts said that his company has been in Belize for about six years trying to study and develop hydroelectric resources in south-

Edgar Puga, met with the villagers to discuss the project and decide how much land should be leased, and the majority of villagers were in support of leasing 250 acres to the project.

Reporter spoke with San Miguel's Deputy Alcalde Luis Cus and he confirmed that most San Miguel villagers were in favour of the project.

But even as villagers express support for HydroMaya, on March 31, two Government employees who went to San Miguel to conduct a survey to find out how villagers felt about the project, were arrested by San Miguel Alcalde Alberto Cal.

Rural Development Minister Marcial Mes, who was accused of abusing his authority by ordering the men's release, told Reporter that he had to intervene because the alcalde had no reason to arrest the men.

Cus agreed with the minister that Cal should not have arrested the men and said that he had advised the alcalde against the decision.

Meanwhile, Tippetts said that HydroMaya will start building a 3 1/2-mile, all-weather road to the project site. He expects that the project will directly hire over 50 people and, indirectly, 25 to 50 more people.