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FEATURED Q&A

Will Mexico's Mayan Train Get Back on Track?



Last month, a Mexican judge halted the Mayan Train project, a signature effort of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador. Work on the project is pictured. // File Photo: Mexican Government.

Q A Mexican federal judge on May 30 indefinitely suspended construction on part of the Mayan Train project, which President Andrés Manuel López Obrador wants to build to service tourists across Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula. The judge ruled that the current plans for the train do not comply with environmental regulations. Environmental activists have said the train would harm wildlife, natural caves and cenotes. How is López Obrador responding to the setback, and how might he modify plans for the Mayan Train? What does the lawsuit against the Mayan Train project say about the Mexican government's efforts and interests in protecting the country's environment, and how are environmental concerns shaping the López Obrador administration's plans for tourism in Mexico? How much would the Mayan Train project benefit communities in the Yucatán Peninsula?

A Carlos Santillán Doherty, general director of ciaO: "It isn't just a train to serve tourists. The Mayan Train is a regional development project. In reality, it tries to regulate and structure mobility and the explosive urban development of the region, having as its axis a train, not a road. The train will offer mobility to the region that has the highest annual population growth rate in Mexico. It will benefit the communities that will be able to move more easily to the great centers of educational and health services in the peninsula. Management of a road right of way is more complicated and more frequently results in irregularities. A train is more contained. A road tends to branch out with irregular accesses that must be watched, and the environmental impact of roads is greater. If there is no mass transportation, there may be a

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TODAY'S NEWS

POLITICAL

Brazilian Police Arrest Second Person in Case of Missing Journalist

Brazil's federal police arrested a second person in connection with the disappearance of British journalist Dom Phillips and Indigenous expert Bruno Pereira, who went missing June 5.

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ECONOMIC

Kerry Urges Mexico to Speed Efforts to Fight Global Warming

U.S. climate envoy John Kerry met with Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador and urged the country to accelerate efforts on climate change.

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ECONOMIC

Puerto Rico's Pierluisi Suspends Gasoline Taxes

Puerto Rico Governor Pedro Pierluisi suspended the U.S. territory's taxes on gasoline and diesel for 45 days amid the international surge in the price of oil.

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Pierluisi // File Photo: Commonwealth of Puerto Rico.

POLITICAL NEWS

Second Arrest Made in Brazil in Case of Missing Journalist

Brazil's federal police said Tuesday that they had arrested a second person in the case of missing British journalist Dom Phillips and Brazilian Indigenous expert Bruno Pereira, the Associated Press reported. Fisherman Osene da Costa de Oliveira, 41, was detained after his brother, Amarildo da Costa de Oliveira, who is also 41, was arrested in connection with the disappearance of the two men, the AP reported. Federal police also said they had seized ammunition and an oar, though they did not say from whom the items were taken or where they were found, the wire service reported. Members of an Indigenous group reportedly told police that Amarildo da Costa de Oliveira brandished a rifle at Phillips and Pereira on June 4, the day before the two men vanished. Amarildo da Costa de Oliveira has denied wrongdoing and has alleged that police officers tortured him in an effort to get a confession, family members told the AP. Authorities continued searching on Tuesday for Phillips and Pereira, who were last seen close to the entrance of the Javari Valley Indigenous territory, near Brazil's border with Peru and Colombia. Search crews discovered a backpack and other items belonging to the men, but police on Monday denied reports that their bodies had been found. Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro on Monday said the men are unlikely to be found alive, adding that he believes they were the victims of "malice," CNN reported.

Ecuadorean Judge Orders Release of Indigenous Leader

An Ecuadorean judge today ordered the release of Indigenous leader Leónidas Iza, who was arrested on Tuesday in connection with violence during anti-government protests, Agence

France-Press reported, citing one of Iza's lawyers. "The judge ordered his immediate release and that he appear periodically before the prosecutor's office" when trial against him begins, the lawyer, Raúl Ilaquiche, told AFP in a telephone interview. Authorities arrested Iza, the president of the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador, in the village of Pastocalle, the Associated Press reported. The confederation has organized protests to demand that the government take action to lower the price of gasoline, set a minimum price for agricultural goods and also call a moratorium on new oil and mining projects, the AP reported. Protesters have reportedly wrecked vehicles, broken into flower farms in central Ecuador and destroyed public property in the center of Quito, the AP reported. Iza has also called on his supporters to topple the government of President Guillermo Lasso. "The arrests of the masterminds and perpetrators of these violent acts have begun," said Lasso, the AP reported. "Now it's up to the prosecution and the judiciary to act, because no one is above the law," he added.

ECONOMIC NEWS

Kerry Urges Mexico to Speed Efforts on Global Warming

U.S. climate envoy John Kerry on Tuesday urged Mexico to accelerate its efforts to address global warming following a meeting with Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, Reuters reported. Kerry said Mexico's plentiful natural resources can aid it in creating and exporting clean energy. He also emphasized Mexico's responsibility to address the climate crisis as the 15th-largest economy in the world, the wire service reported. "The president has been very clear about his readiness to transition but to do so in a way that meets the needs of the people of Mexico," Kerry said about López Obrador's efforts to address global warming. Kerry added that the Mexican president is committed to involving major

NEWS BRIEFS

Venezuela's Maduro Arrives in Qatar, Meeting Today With Emir

Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro arrived Tuesday in Qatar where he is to meet today with Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, Reuters reported, citing Qatar's state news agency QNA. Maduro and the emir will seek to "develop and strengthen" bilateral relations during the meeting. Maduro's visit to Qatar is his latest stop on a tour that has also included visits to Kuwait, Turkey, Algeria and Iran.

Puerto Rico Suspends Gasoline, Diesel Taxes for 45 Days Amid Price Surge

Puerto Rico Governor Pedro Pierluisi on Tuesday signed a measure that suspends taxes on gasoline and diesel for 45 days, the Associated Press reported. The decision, made amid an international surge in the price of oil, will suspend the territory's 16- and four-cent tax per gallon of gasoline and diesel, respectively. Pierluisi added that \$25 million will be added to the government's general fund in an effort to offset the tax moratorium's loss of revenue, the wire service reported.

Brazilian Court Allows Home-Grown Cannabis for Medical Uses

A Brazilian Superior Court of Justice panel on Tuesday agreed unanimously to authorize three patients to grow cannabis for their own medical treatment in a decision that may be applied nationwide, the Associated Press reported. Currently, the law in Brazil only allows for the medical use of cannabis-derived products from imported goods. Judge Rogério Schietti said the five-person panel made its decision because the Brazilian government has not taken a scientific position on the issue. "The discourse against this possibility is moralistic," he said.

actors such as foreign energy companies in the process of producing energy. “He has made the decision to facilitate those companies being able to move forward and do business and sent a message that the private sector will be able to take part in various ways,” Kerry said, Reuters reported. “Follow-up was given to commitments in energy and the environment,” López Obrador said of his meeting with Kerry in a Tuesday Twitter posting. On Friday, Mexico is planning to announce 10 steps to address climate change, said Foreign Minister Marcelo Ebrard, Reuters reported.

BUSINESS NEWS

Revolut Launching in Countries Including Chile, Ecuador

London-based Revolut, a digital banking platform, is launching a streamlined version of its app in five new countries, including Chile and Ecuador, which will allow customers to transfer money using more than 30 currencies to more than 50 countries, Reuters reported today. Customers transferring money to other Revolut customers will not incur any fees, while transfers to non-Revolut accounts will have a fee of \$1 or 1 percent, whichever is greater, in the five new countries where the app is launching. In addition to Chile and Ecuador, the app will also be available in Sri Lanka, Azerbaijan and Oman, the wire service reported. The platform, which launched in 2015, has more than 18 million customers worldwide, and upwards of 500,000 businesses using its products, the wire service reported. The company’s products include crypto trading, payments services, stock trading and savings accounts. In April, the company’s CEO, Nik Storonsky said Revolut aims to become a “superapp,” Reuters reported. “We’re delighted to launch the Revolut app in five countries as we continue to expand access to Revolut’s fast, secure and easy money transfers to countries around the world,” said Vlad Yatsenko, Revolut’s chief technology officer, IBS Intelligence reported.

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more pernicious impact on the peninsula due to the population growth in the area. The road, simply because of its geometry, dimensions and development, has a major impact through its construction. Greenhouse gas emissions are lower and easier to regulate for trains than for thousands of vehicles circulating on roads. What the Mexican government is doing—now forced by a judge—is presenting the environmental impact study of the suspended section and the solutions that will mitigate the impact. And there are solutions, or we would not see trains in the forests of Canada or in the Swiss Alps. The Mayan Train project has interesting and innovative proposals for environmental management that respect biodiversity and natural resources.”

A José F. Albarrán Núñez, former president of Academia de Ingeniería México: “The Mayan Train project is a very poorly conceived project, as are all of AMLO’s projects. Driven by political-electoral objectives, very little effort has been put into the planning,

“**We must remember what happened to Mexico City Metro Line 12...**”

— José F. Albarrán Núñez

design and development of the project. Thus, the project has not adequately and sufficiently considered social, environmental and economic issues (the sustainability trilemma: energy security, social equity and environmental impact mitigation). Because of its political-electoral drive, the project ‘must continue’ regardless of any social opposition, environmental damage or financial expenditure and will almost certainly result in poor design, poor construction and poor operational performance. We must remember what happened to Mexico City Metro

Line 12 and expect accidents, high operation and maintenance costs and potentially a useless investment.”

A Diane E. Davis, Charles Dyer Norton Professor of Regional Planning and Urbanism and co-chair of the faculty committee on Mexico in the David Rockefeller

Center for Latin American Studies at Harvard University:

“This ruling offers an opportunity to reflect on the complexity of regional planning in Mexico and to celebrate the role institutions and processes play in mediating among competing interests with colliding priorities. The judge’s decision to uphold environmental impact statements in mega-project construction shows that the legal system can still play an important role in democratizing development in Mexico, which has been questioned in the face of recent efforts to vindictively use the law to apprehend 31 distinguished science and technology researchers serving on the National Council for Science and Technology’s Scientific Technological Advisory Forum. The ruling is a victory for committed Indigenous and environmental groups that have struggled against the Tren Maya because of its potentially destructive impacts. López Obrador should recognize that direct mobilization still matters, even when used against his preferred policy objectives, and it should be applauded when it leads to rulings that reinforce a vibrant administration of justice. The longer-term implications for the Yucatán region and Mexico are still unclear. López Obrador is not the first Mexican president to prioritize tourism as a pathway toward economic growth. Such decisions are always fraught with unequally distributed bias, power and privilege. The Yucatán’s residents must reckon with a looming environmental crisis, the threats to livelihoods and the potential mass extinction of flora and fauna. López Obrador is right to acknowledge the historic neglect of regions far from Mexico City, and he has helped ensure that the

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Secretariat of Agrarian, Land and Urban Development will sign onto that mission with a range of mega-projects in the Yucatán Peninsula and elsewhere. I suspect that the longer-term impact of this ruling will be to extend the conversation further, keeping citizens organized and state agencies cognizant of the regulatory procedures and legal mandates they must follow. I would not be surprised if the government finds a new way of bringing 'all aboard' with the Tren Maya."

A Benjamin Torres-Barrón, partner at Baker & McKenzie Abogados in Mexico City: "Section Five of the Mayan Train, which goes from Playa del Carmen to Tulum and consists of 67.6 kilometers and two stations, was permanently suspended because it did not have an Environmental Impact Statement (MIA), a mandatory document to start the construction of any infrastructure project. Fonatur, the body responsible for the train's construction, on May 18 presented the MIA, which the National Council for Science and Technology (Conacyt) and the National Institute of Ecology (Inecol) had prepared. If citizens have a favorable opinion of the MIA and the Secretariat of Environment and Natural Resources approves it, the govern-

ment will file a judicial appeal to lift the suspension so that work can continue on the project. Environmentalists and the MIA show the possibility of severe impacts to the subterranean flows and the karstic system, as

“Well-planned trains that have the necessary infrastructure generate a virtuous circle...”

— Benjamin Torres-Barrón

well as possible subsidence and landslides. Infrastructure work generates jobs and attract new investments. The stations can generate tourist complexes and, with this, economically benefit the communities of the Yucatán Peninsula. Well-planned trains that have the necessary infrastructure generate a virtuous circle, raising quality of life as well as the productivity and competitiveness of the area."

The Advisor welcomes comments on its Q&A section. Readers can write editor Gene Kuleta at ekuleta@thedialogue.org.

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