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Statement on

U.S.—PANAMA
RELATIONS

UNITED STATES
CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

November 10, 1976

A Statement on

U.S. - PANAMA RELATIONS

The United States and the Republic of Panama are presently engaged in negotiations about the future of the Panama Canal. These negotiations have been in progress since 1964 and have been advanced significantly since the Statement of Principles formulated by the two governments in 1974.

The Administrative Board of the U.S. Catholic Conference issued a policy statement in February 1975 which affirmed that: "It is a moral imperative—a matter of elemental social justice—that a new and more just treaty be negotiated." (Panama-U.S. Relations, 1975) We continue to believe that the moral imperative exists to fashion a new treaty which respects the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Panama, and dissolves the vestiges of a relationship which more closely resembles the colonial politics of the nineteenth century than the realities of an interdependent world of sovereign and equal states.

Since 1975 there has been extensive debate in the United States about the treaty negotiations. Issues of a political, strategic and economic nature have been raised. In addition, the status of U.S. citizens living in the Canal Zone is a matter of concern for U.S. policy. Our purpose in this statement is to reaffirm our stance in favor of a new treaty by specifying major issues which we believe should be in the forefront of the public debate and policy decision-making in the United States.

Speaking as bishops of the Catholic Church, our perspective on the treaty negotiations is set by a text from Pope John XXIII's *Pacem In Terris*. In his discussion of relations between states, the Pope said: "Each of them, accordingly, is vested with the right to existence, to self-development and the means fitting to its attainment, and to be the one primarily responsible for this self-development." (para. 86) It is this principle which is at stake in the treaty negotiations: the fundamental question is the need to acknowledge in principle and in fact Panamanian sovereignty

over its own territory. The terms of the 1903 Treaty acknowledge the principle of Panamanian sovereignty, but prevent its exercise in any form in the Canal Zone. Without rehearsing the history or the terms of the treaty, we simply would affirm that the moral, legal and political realities of international life today render the 1903 Treaty an anachronism.

The terms of the Treaty make it impossible for Panama to be the primary agent of its own development, because it deprives the nation of a substantial part of its territory, income and capacity for planning the integral development of its people. Finally, by restricting sovereignty in this way, the present relationship strikes directly at the national dignity and sense of respect which any nation needs for free and independent existence. To quote Pope John again, "Nor must it be forgotten, in this connection, that peoples can be highly sensitive, and with good reason, in matters touching their dignity and honor." (para. 89)

Because the issue of sovereignty is so closely tied to the freedom and self-determination of a nation, it has become an issue of dignity and honor for the Panamanians. Given our political history, the world has a right to expect that Americans will be especially sensitive to another nation's claims for freedom, dignity and self-determination.

The implications of the sovereignty issue for Panama can be illustrated with two examples: First, as we indicated in our 1975 statement, the inability of Panama to integrate the Canal and the territory comprising the Canal Zone into its national planning has significant economic consequences ranging from urban congestion in Panama City to the amount of revenue which can be garnered from operating the Canal. Second, through a process of unilateral actions, the United States has developed in the Canal Zone a very substantial military presence which goes far beyond the requirements for defending the Canal. The existence there of the U.S. Southern Command implies a U.S. military presence throughout Latin America. It is a continuing political problem, casting reflection on the independence of Panama, for its government to be so closely tied, without choice, to the military policy of the United States in Latin America. Without a

new treaty the Panamanians have no possibility of addressing either of these issues.

We support a new treaty, therefore, because we see it as a requirement of justice between our nations. As we consider this larger question of justice, however, we wish also to express our pastoral concern and public support for a negotiated treaty which will protect the welfare of the people living and working in the Canal Zone. We especially call attention to the need for an agreement which will provide for the economic security of Americans presently employed in the Canal Zone. This too is a requirement of justice which rests upon both the United States and Panamanian governments.

The issues involved between our two countries are complex; they are also emotionally volatile. The need in both countries is for reasoned discussion, a sense of the other's point of view and a commitment to a fair resolution which will lay the basis for a long-term relationship of respect and cooperation between our governments and our peoples. It is to achieve these objectives that we commit ourselves to a continued program of public education and discussion in the United States.

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