

# Chalillo is on, says GOB ! Final approval given April 5

The Attorney General of Belize has issued a formal statement denying a report from the Canadian environmental organization PROBE, describing the report as inaccurate and misleading. The PROBE report said that the government of Belize has admitted in court that it did not give permission to FORTIS to build the dam at Chalillo. He has also condemned the *Reporter* for printing this report.

The government statement this week declares that the Department of the Environment has indeed given final approval to BECOL to build the Chalillo Dam. This happened on April 5, after BECOL agreed to an environmental compliance plan. The compliance plan was approved on April 5 this year, some five or six weeks after the BACONGO legal action was begun on February 8.

The environmental compliance plan requires BECOL to undertake the dam construction "in a professional manner" and "to the highest environmental standards."

NEAC, the National Environmental Appraisal Committee, and the Department of the Environment will re-

quire information sessions to be held with the public to keep the people informed about what BECOL is required to do. "Any new concerns will be addressed as they arise," the official release states.

BACONGO's application before the Supreme Court, introduced in February this year, is asking the Court to rule that the Government of Belize acted illegally when it gave permission for BECOL to build the new dam, knowing that the law requires all environmental studies and consultations to be completed beforehand.

All the environmental studies and consultations have still not been completed to this day. But in court, the government's lawyers argued that at the time the BACONGO petition was introduced, GOB had not yet given permission, that is to say, had not yet broken any law.

The government goes ahead to BECOL on April 5 to build the dam may still be challenged in court however, because the BECOL-Fortis-BEL axis has still not completed all the environmental studies and consultations required of them by law.

It is doubtful whether

the Environmental Compliance Plan which BECOL has agreed to is sufficient to satisfy the requirements of the law, which are very specific on this point.

So far no details have been released to the public about this Environmental Compliance Plan, and who has the legal authority to enforce compliance once the actual construction work gets under way. It is also a most unusual way to approve the construction of a large dam, leaving it up to the builders to determine what are "highest environmental standards."

The Environmental Impact Assessment produced for the Fortis-BEL-BECOL group has been widely assailed and condemned on two grounds:

1. It failed to distinguish shale from granite at the dam site, identifying the shale & sandstone beds as granite, and

2. It failed to take formal notice of a substantial geological fault in the immediate area where the dam reservoir is expected to be placed, an area which is still seismologically active.

The Attorney General's release also suggested that in opposing the Chalillo Dam and allowing the debate to

continue the *Reporter* has been operating as a lobby for foreign environmental groups.

*Reporter* Publisher Harry Lawrence responded to these accusations this week by denying the lobbyist charges. "*Reporter* is a lobbyist for no one and for no special interests," Lawrence said.

"*Reporter* only wants what is good for Belize. And after studying the government's tactics on Chalillo, *Reporter* has become convinced that a great con job is under way to mask Chalillo as something good, when in fact it offers no advantage to Belize, and may be downright dangerous," he said.

"*Reporter* recognizes that it has to pay a price for opposing the government and big business on the Chalillo issue. We also have a duty to inform the nation. We believe that the future will prove us right, and that the work we do here today will be fully vindicated," Lawrence said.