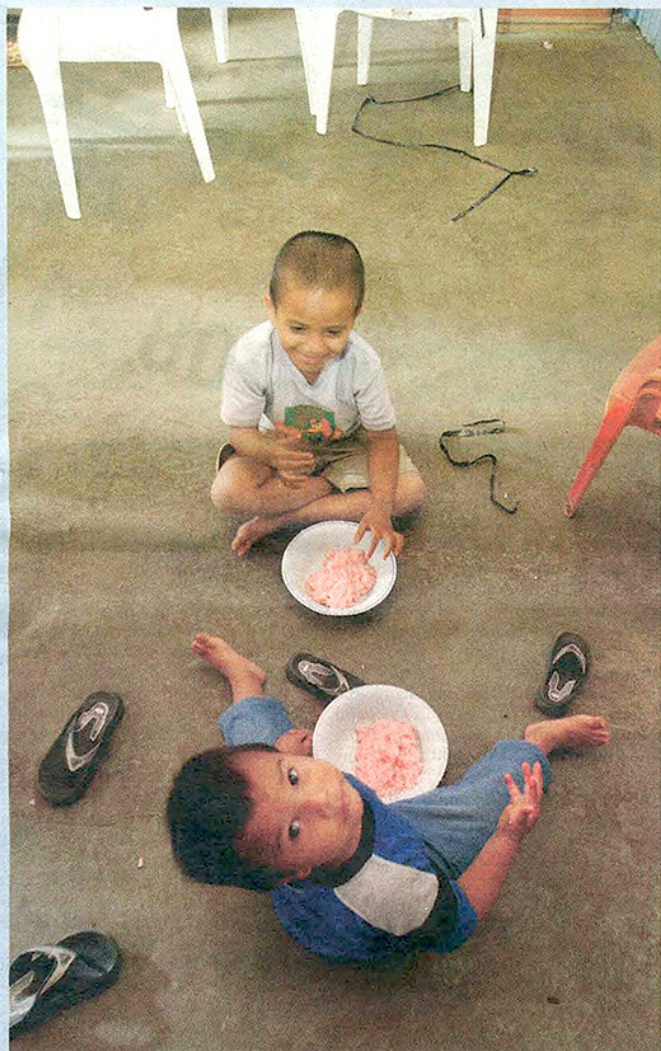


ENJOYING A WARM MEAL

Photo by Mónica Quesada



Food for the Children: Two-year-old Roy Ovando (at bottom) and his 5-year-old brother Charlie eat a rice dish prepared by community kitchen volunteers in the Triángulo de Solidaridad shantytown in Tibás, north of San José. The kitchen provides healthy meals to hundreds of young children daily thanks to the donations it receives.

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Elections Generate Little Enthusiasm

By Katherine Stanley

Tico Times Staff

Corruption allegations. Local scandals. Unfinished business. This year's municipal elections have it all – except, perhaps, voters.

Whether citizens' concerns about their local governments will bring them to the polls Sunday in greater numbers than in the first mayoral elections four years ago remains to be seen. Some observers maintain the campaigns leading up to this year's elections – only the second time in history Costa Ricans have been able to choose their mayors – have been marked by increased citizen participation. Certainly some voters can't wait to make their voices heard, including a group of blind citizens whose lobby for Braille ballots will pay off on Election Day when they cast their votes unassisted for the first time.

However, there's also evidence to suggest fewer people will vote Sunday than in the 2002 municipal elections, when 77% of

the country's eligible voters stayed home. Even election cheerleaders such as Raul Barboza, of the Institute for Municipal Development (IFAM), seem to pin some of their hopes on factors such as... well, the weather.

"The climatic aspect four years ago didn't help at all," Barboza told The Tico Times this week. "It rained a lot (on Election Day). I hope this year will be different."

Those interviewed on the streets of the capital yesterday said not even a cloudless sky could entice them to show up. In the latest version of The Tico Times' highly unscientific San José street poll – which correctly predicted lower numbers than expected for President Oscar Arias in February's elections – only one person said she plans to vote, and she works for the Supreme Elections Tribunal (TSE).

"I hope people will come and vote, but I doubt it," said the woman, a resident of Cartago, east of San José, who declined to

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Environmentalists Decry Lake Arenal Development

By Blake Schmidt

Tico Times Staff

TILARÁN, Guanacaste – A handful of lavish real estate developments that promise to erect hundreds of new constructions along the shores of Lake Arenal here in northwestern Costa Rica has local residents here buzzing.

The banks of this mystical windswept lake have remained more or less green in recent years, despite booms in Costa Rica's tourism and real estate sectors that have completely transformed the face of many tourism-attracting communities.

All along the northern and central Pacific coast and in the booming western Central Valley, for instance, municipalities have been digging scant funds out of municipal purses to try to control recent rapid growth.

Around Lake Arenal, there are no ultra-

luxury resorts or multimillion-dollar hotel projects in the works. Still, residents are concerned about developers coming in with plans to build up along the shores' slopes above a precious Costa Rican resource.

"We're trying to catch this at an early stage... we can't lose the lake," said Sandy Shaw, secretary of the Tilarán-based environmental group Fuentes Verdes.

Fuentes Verdes, government officials and other area residents are making lots of noise over some lavish lakeside developments planned here, which promise to change the face of Arenal. They say development is happening largely unregulated – and is a threat to Lake Arenal, a vital national water and energy resource that lies at the bottom of a valley with a bowl-like watershed that leads into the manmade reservoir.

The Public Health Ministry has been find-

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NEWS

New Legislative Agenda Good News for Press Bill

Freedom of expression shot to the top of the charts this week when the Executive Branch moved press law reforms to third place on lawmakers' agenda.

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BUSINESS

Central Bank Plans Forward Exchange Market

Financial institutions may soon offer new ways for users of U.S. dollars to minimize the risks involved with the country's new exchange rate system.

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WEEKEND

Beekeeping Transforms Rural Community

The coffee community of San Pablo de Turruabares, southwest of San José, embraces apiculture as an alternative and sustainable source of income.

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THE NICA TIMES

Crimes Shake Up Residents

Popular tourism spots Granada and San Juan del Sur were both hit by violent crimes that have folks here on edge.



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Bit by Bit, Community Kitchen Struggles Ahead

By Katherine Stanley

Tico Times Staff

It was fitting. Leaning up against a poster reading, “*Dejen que los niños se acerquen a mí*” (“Let the little children come unto me”), one could feel the jostling bodies of anxious kids and teenagers outside, on the other side of the thin, swaying wall. They were pressing forward, trying to get closer to the open door – coming unto a free meal that, for some of the young people, would be their only real food of the day.

That was the scene one recent weekday at the soup kitchen in the Triángulo de Solidaridad shantytown in Tibás, just north of San José, where a few hardworking women volunteer as many as six hours each day to cook lunch for more than 300 children. A Catholic priest launched the project in October 2005. More than a year later, exposure from The Tico Times and donations from Ticos and foreigners have made the work a bit easier. But that doesn't mean it's easy.

Sometimes, “we have to tell them there's no more,” said Juana López, 27, one of the project's most faithful volunteers. On Oct. 26 she'd helped to make two massive pots of traditional *arroz con leche* for the crowd, but she said that many weeks, there are too many kids and too little food. “They go off with empty hands.”

Helping López and the other volunteers as they sought to close that gap on that day was Mitch Zychowski, 56, a Pennsylvania resident who began visiting Costa Rica a few years ago. On the plane during one trip home from Costa Rica, he picked up The Tico Times and read “Community Kitchen Helps Feed Poor Youth” (TT, May 5).

“I started crying on the plane. It broke my heart,” he said, standing outside the small building where the food is cooked and served.

Particularly attention-grabbing, he said, was the idea that volunteers didn't have enough resources to feed all the kids who needed help.

“How would you decide what child to give it to?” he said, gesturing at the line beginning



Feeding the Children: Juana López (above left) serves up food for children in the Triángulo de Solidaridad neighborhood just north of San José. U.S. donor Mitch Zychowski (at right) recently visited the community kitchen, which survives on donations to provide more than 300 meals each day.



Mónica Quesada | Tico Times

to form. “To her? To her? To him?”

The owner of his own business, Enjoy Coupon Book, a book of donated coupons that nonprofit organizations sell to raise funds, Zychowski now donates \$700-800 per month to the community kitchen, and hopes to soon raise that figure to \$1,000. He has visited at least once per month since May, bringing rice, beans and sacks of other groceries.

In his absence, his business partner in the Puerto Jiménez project, Costa Rican citizen Oscar Villalobos, and Villalobos' cousin Gloriana Martínez, visit the kitchen to provide support and keep track of what supplies the women need.

The bulk of the donations have come from Zychowski's own pocket, though he's stepping up fundraising efforts in the United States. A recent golf outing in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, drew 40 participants and

raised \$3,500 for the kitchen.

The May 5 Tico Times article helps him drum up funds as well.

“I carry this around Pittsburgh with me all the time – I bum money, is what I do,” he said with a grin.

Others far and wide have stepped up to help the kitchen as well, according to priest Luis Gonzalo Mateo, who discovered the Triángulo one day last year while taking a walk to get to know the community near his church, a historic building known as the Iglesia de Ladrillo (the Brick Church). He worked with a few residents to found the kitchen, not only to provide food for the community's kids but also to give women in the neighborhood a group project.

Padre Mateo, as he is known, spoke to The Tico Times recently, sounding optimistic about the kitchen's prospects. A jewelry store in Miami, Florida, that pledged

\$1,000 per month (TT, May 26) following the original article has sent payments, and people who stop by the church often make donations big and small, he said.

Mateo said the kitchen can always use more support.

López agreed, pointing out that although 300 kids are on the kitchen's current recipient list, the shantytown holds many more children. As in most of Costa Rica's *tugurios* – communities with inadequate housing conditions – it's hard to make a good estimate of how many families live in the Triángulo, where makeshift shelters are crammed onto lots that often hold several families. López estimates there are 500 lots with as many as 1,500 children, five times the number the kitchen is serving now.

The Spanish priest, 70, is also working on another ongoing project: raising money to buy land for 50 families from another illegal settlement evicted earlier this year, La Candela, near Juan Santamaría International Airport northwest of San José. Padre Mateo is searching for a lot in the western or northern Central Valley where the families could build homes and start a school.

Though some evicted families received assistance from the Mixed Institute for Social Aid (IMAS), many families of illegal Nicaraguan immigrants didn't get a penny, the priest said. Today, they're lodged anywhere they could find shelter, “in this little corner or that,” he said, struggling to make ends meet to buy food or pay their rent.

“Who knows if we'll find someone to support this (effort),” he said, adding that he's raised \$2,500 of the total \$20,000 he hopes to obtain to buy a lot. ■

How to Help

For information on how to help with the community kitchen or purchase land, contact priest Luis Gonzalo Mateo at 222-5057.

For more information on Mitch Zychowski's efforts, e-mail mitch@enjoycouponbook.com