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COVER STORY

Olga Bosquez — my country needs me

WHEN I visited the World Maritime University last year they were still talking about the lady graduate from Panama. Once met, she is not easily forgotten. Now Olga Bosquez is going to need all the presence she has got, because she has taken on a tough job.

After nine years running the Panama register, Dr Hugo Torrijos wants to go back to running his law practice. He says publicly, modestly, that personality is not important, it is service that matters. But it is largely due to his efforts that Panama has kept its place as the second largest ship register in the world. When he decided to go, he wanted the person taking over from him to have the right personality. He recommended Bosquez who has worked with him for six years. He is handing her a hot potato, but doing it confidently.

Under threat

The Panama register is under threat. Cost competition from upstart open registers is one problem. The poor safety image is another. And the low intensity war that Washington has declared against Panama's rulers is a third. Behind all that, there is a bigger problem still. Before the year 2000, Panama has to develop a maritime infrastructure capable of running the canal. Bosquez is well aware of the problems. "It is the same clients for the canal, the register and the ports," she says. "Panama is a small country but it is important in marine matters. We have to work hard to meet our international responsibilities."

Bosquez is intensely patriotic, and not afraid to say so. Her appointment to take over the register came as a surprise, and not a welcome one, when you look at the problems. But she puts a brave face on it. "It is an opportunity for me," says Bosquez, "I will do whatever is needed for my country."

Bosquez is patriotic, but not political. She insists that the maritime affairs department of Panama is apolitical. But at the same time, she says that maritime affairs has been identified as a national priority, and

has the full support of the president. "We have got difficult times ahead," she says. "We have to build on and strengthen the register and the whole maritime structure of the nation."

"We have the full support of the government and the president, they know our problems, and they want a pragmatic response." Bosquez is



Olga Bosquez took over as director general of the Panama register when Dr Hugo Torrijos resigned last week. She has a tough act to follow.

Olga Bosquez

October 1989 Director general of *Secnaves*

January 1988 Main technical counterpart of the Republic of Panama in the PAN-86/008 Maritime Sector Project sponsored by UNDP and IMO, concerned with upgrading Panama's maritime infrastructure. Teaching maritime economics at the *Escuela Nautica de Panama*.

December 1987 MSc General Maritime Administration, World Maritime University, Malmo, Sweden.

1984 to 1986 Adviser to Ministry of Treasury.

1977 BA Economic Sciences, University of Panama.

intense when she talks about her country. "We are a sovereign nation, we have to work to keep it that way. Maritime affairs are too important to be left to one side."

The deck is stacked against Panama, and the register. The New York office was constructively evicted last month. Liberia has cut its fees and maintained a highly visible image as a responsible and safe register. The US administration continues to pressure General Noriega, with rumblings of closing ports to Panama flag ships, and economic sanctions that hurt more every day. The safety record of the register is poor, and the image is worse. Safety inspections were cut back last year, because of financial problems. Graft, real or imaginary, continues to be associated with Panamanian dealings. The resignation of Dr Torrijos, however reasonable, is bound to be taken in some quarters as a sign of slipping confidence. IMO has been suffering widely publicised financial problems due to the inability of Panama to pay its dues. And Panama has been slow to adopt some of the important conventions, such as STCW, leaving its ships open to port state control delays.

Confidence

Despite all that, Bosquez is confident. She is coming into the job with a packet of measures aimed at not only protecting the register, but building it up. Firstly, there is fees. The registration fees are being cut dramatically, the fee scale simplified and gross tonnage adopted instead of net. The effect of this is to cut costs for a panamax tanker by over \$40,000. That is likely to make a hole in the budget, but according to Bosquez, the estimated \$5m annual drop in income will still leave some \$35m in the pot. "In any case," she says, "if we do not do this, then we shall lose the ships and the income to our competitors."

Secondly, there is safety, and the poor image. "We have got to tackle not only the substance of safety", she says, "but also the image. We shall tackle the substance first, it is the most important." In practice, that

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means taking the advice of the IMO expert she has been working with in Panama. He advises that the number of inspectors around the world should be cut, but the quality raised and the inspections better targeted. The aim is to ensure that all Panamanian ships are inspected at least every two years, which requires a careful look at trade patterns and about three and a half thousand ship inspections per year. Last year there were six hundred, but as of November 1 this year, a full programme will be up and running.

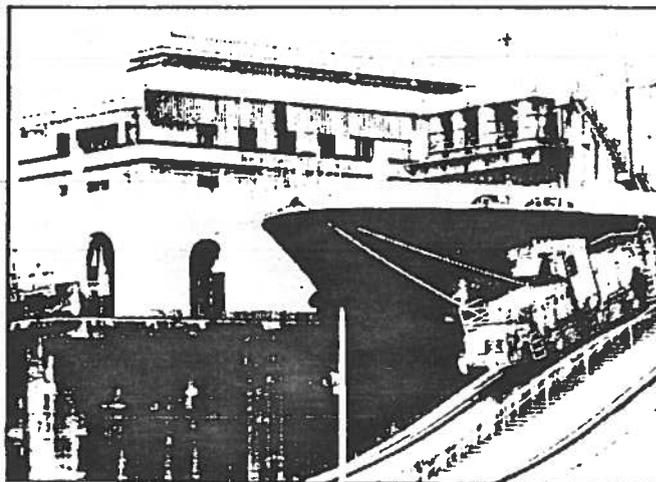
Panama has paid up a good chunk of arrears at IMO and intends to keep up with payments, so that takes one weight from Bosquez's back. At the same time, the government is expected to ratify the STCW convention within a month, giving increased legitimacy to Panama flag vessels. Bosquez is adamant that the Marinexam system fully implements the requirements of the STCW, that is up and running and that ratifying the convention will not add to the register's costs.

Signing the ILO 147 Minimum Standards Convention is also under consideration, but will be discussed with owners before any decision is made.

Different centres

On the confidence side, Dr Torrijos and Bosquez were taking a swing through the main maritime centres this week, talking to owners, bankers and lawyers. For some time Bosquez has been studying the merits of a

"Honouring the past by building the future." Easy to say but hard to do when Uncle Sam is leaning on you.



different centre for an overseas office. No decisions yet, but London is high on the list, because of its banks and lawyers. Hong Kong is second, because so many owners using the flag are from the Far East. Bosquez says she will be continuing the policy of Dr Torrijos, "the customer is always right." So that should help the confidence side of things.

Delicate question

What about graft? Here we see Bosquez the diplomat. "That is a delicate question," she says. "We always react swiftly to any complaints and tackle them as best we can." What she does not say is that some of the problems will go away, because the law has been changed to cut out the need for companies to go through the Panamanian consulates in the US when registering a vessel. Behind all this there is another reason for her confidence. Owners like Panama and

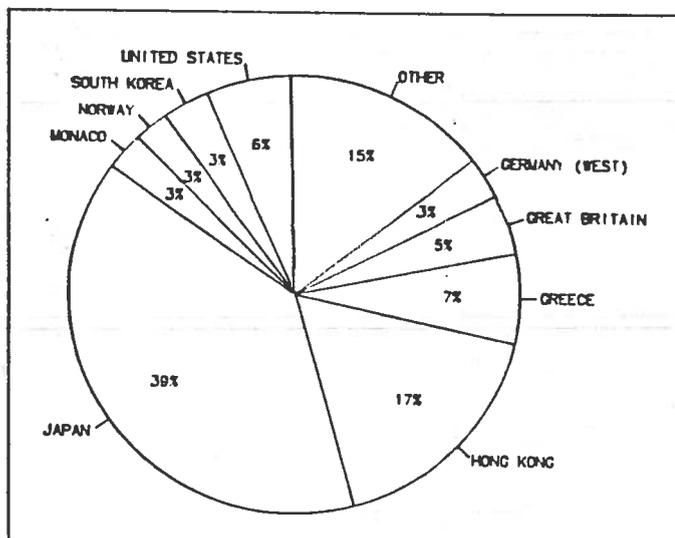
are used to it. They will not desert it easily just because Uncle Sam thinks they should. August was a record month for new registrations, and with over 3000 large vessels and 70m dwt on the books, Panama is still firmly in the world number two slot.

That's the business, what about the person? Questions about Bosquez's private life get the same delicate brush-off as questions about graft. She was married, and isn't now. She has two children, and will not admit to any hobbies. She is dedicated to her work. And she cannot see any problem with being a woman in a man's world. "As long as matters are kept on a professional level," says Bosquez, "a woman can do anything a man can do, you should know that." She is proud that women hold a number of good positions in Panama, and also points out that it is an express policy of IMO that women should be encouraged to take a larger role in shipping.

Suffering

Soft spoken, but no soft character. She shows pain when she talks about the suffering that US pressure is causing to the Panamanian people. But she shows steel when she talks about building up the maritime infrastructure of Panama. She has been groomed for the job, and she is going to give it her best. "I did not seek this job," says Bosquez "but I know how much Panama needs a better maritime infrastructure. I hope I can contribute to that."

John Guy



Current Panama register by ownership (by dwt). The US has only a small slice but its trading partners have most of the cake. (Graph courtesy of FISYS Ltd)