

Letter from Sister Angelina Mitre, Panama

Angelina Mitre, RSM

To all my Sisters and Mercy Associates living outside of Panama,

In recent days, there has been increasing talk about the Panama Canal. However, much of the information being shared is inaccurate and expressed in a way that disrespects my country. I know that the majority of the people in the United States do not share these views. However, when I lived in the U.S. for my studies, I noticed that news about other countries' realities was scarce.

As a Panamanian and a Sister of Mercy, I find it disrespectful how certain events are being misrepresented, disregarding history and portraying Panama as an ignorant nation that can be overpowered by a stronger country.

The relationship between Panama and the United States has not been built on equality and justice. Here is a brief historical overview of some key events:

- **1821:** Panama gained independence from Spain and joined Colombia, inspired by Simón Bolívar's vision of a great united nation.
- **1881:** France began the construction of the Canal while Panama was still part of Colombia. However, the project failed due to various factors, including diseases such as yellow fever, malaria, and cholera, which caused the deaths of many workers.
- **1903:** Panama separated from Colombia after years of neglect by the Colombian government.
- **1904:** The United States took over the Canal project, taking advantage of Panamanian discontent and negotiating with the newly independent nation under unequal conditions.
- **1914:** The U.S. completed the Canal in just ten years.
- **Treaty with the U.S.:** A treaty was signed, granting the United States control over a portion of Panamanian territory in perpetuity for the operation of the Canal.
- **Canal Zone:** For decades, the Canal Zone was under U.S. jurisdiction, restricting Panamanians' free access.
- **1964:** Panamanian students carry their country's flag to the Canal to be placed besides the U.S. flag, sparking a movement that cost human lives but ignited change.
- **1977:** The Torrijos-Carter Treaties were signed, outlining the gradual transfer of the Canal back to Panama and the withdrawal of U.S. military bases.
- **1999:** On December 31, Panama assumed full control of the Canal, fulfilling the agreements signed in 1977.
- **2016:** The Panama Canal expansion was completed, allowing the passage of larger ships.

Given these facts, we must ask: **Do you believe that the Canal was "gift-wrapped" and handed back to us, as the U.S. president claimed?** No, it was the result of years of struggle by the Panamanian people.

Regarding recent political statements:

- During his visit to Panama, U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio claimed that China controls the Panama Canal. **This is false.** While China does operate two ports at the entrances of the Canal, the **Canal is 100% managed by the Panamanian government** through the Panama Canal Authority.
- Panamanian President José Raúl Mulino announced that Panama will no longer continue its participation in China's "Belt and Road Initiative," an agreement signed in 2017. China has

increased its presence in Latin America and has won bids for major projects in Panama, raising concerns.

- Mulino also proposed establishing a **military base in Darién** to house migrants who are not accepted back into their home countries. **We strongly oppose this measure**, as it would become a detention center for vulnerable populations.

The Panamanian people fear that, despite their opposition, external pressure will lead to unwanted concessions. Amid our internal crisis, there is also growing concern about the possibility of another U.S. military intervention, like the one in 1989, the scars of which still linger in our nation.

We do not want to be a colony of the United States, China, or any other country. We seek to be a sovereign, neutral, and peaceful nation committed to social justice.

In this Jubilee Year of 2025, Pope Francis has called us to be "**Pilgrims of Hope.**" Hope is a call to unity and trust in a better future, built on faith and love for one another. **Let us not allow darkness to extinguish our hope.**