

# ***MESOAMERICA***

*Volume 25, Number 8, August 2006*

---



## **COSTA RICA**

### **Oscar Arias Chasing Another Nobel?**

It was only 20 years ago that Oscar Arias locked the leaders of the northern five Central American countries in a room until they all agreed to a peace agreement. That agreement, and also Arias, is credited for bringing the eventual end to the various armed conflicts that raged on the isthmus. For his part, Arias—who was then, as he is now, president of Costa Rica—won the Nobel Peace Prize in '87.

After representatives of Colombian paramilitaries met with Arias in Costa Rica on 4 Aug, and asked him to join the peace process in their country, and the Costa Rican president discussed the proposal with his Colombian counterpart the following week in Colombia, some are wondering if the peacemaker is up to his old tricks again.

Antonio López, spokesman for the delegation of at least four paramilitary leaders that included one of the most powerful paramilitary chiefs in Colombia, Carlos Mario Jiménez (also known as Macaco), said they sought out Arias because of his experience in peace negotiations. Following the meeting with Arias, López told the press gathered at the presidential office on 4 Aug, that the delegation had requested Arias to “accompany” them in the peace process in Colombia, and that the Arias Foundation for Peace and Human Progress train 20 former paramilitary fighters in “peace and production,” to help their reinsertion to Colombian civil society.

Since the beginning of Colombian President Alvaro Uribe’s first term in '02, the various paramilitary groups in Colombia—somewhat united under the organization Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC)—began disarming and demobilizing. At the 4 Aug press conference López said that some 31,500 paramilitary fighters have “demobilized” and that the paramilitaries have turned in 17,600 weapons.

Arias praised the initiative of the paramilitaries—who, like the Central American guerrillas—have been linked to massacres, kidnappings and other human rights abuses and have been listed as a terrorist organization by both the US and the European Union, and called their disarmament “an example for the whole world.” Arias affirmed that he is interested in doing what he can for peace in Colombia, as long as those involved in the conflict agree.

“I have always said that there cannot be a single Latin American who would refuse to help, to put his or her grain of sand, to silence the guns in any country in the world, especially a sister country like Colombia,” Arias said.

Costa Rican Foreign Minister Bruno Stagno said the government would have to study the proposal to train the former AUC members in Costa Rica, principally to see if the Arias Foundation could fund it, or if money would have to be sought in the international community.

Arias went to Colombia two days later to attend the inauguration of Uribe’s second term as president, at which time he proposed that Colombia use Costa Rica as a neutral territory for peace talks with the guerrilla forces that have been fighting against government forces since the ’60s. The Lenin-Marxist Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) are the principal insurgents and control vast swaths of Colombian territory. Former Colombian President Andrés Pastraña called off peace talks with the FARC in ’02 following some high-profile kidnappings, attacks and the hijacking of an airliner. The second-most powerful guerrilla group, the National Liberation Army (ELN), is currently participating in peace talks with the Colombian government, in Havana, Cuba.

The same day the paramilitaries met with Arias, eight people were killed in separate car bombings in Colombia, which have been blamed on FARC.

At a press conference following Arias’ return to Costa Rica, the president—who is faced with only a 44% approval rating, according to a CID-Gallup poll released that same day—brushed off criticisms that he is neglecting problems at home while trying to solve conflicts in other countries.

“Not 20 years ago, nor today, am I going to abandon the national agenda,” Arias said. “One must have a very stingy spirit to criticize someone who can save human lives and doesn’t refuse to do so.”

### **Government Officials Say Immigration Law Cannot be Enforced**

Immigration officials have announced that whether or not the new immigration law takes effect in Aug, the controversial law passed during President Abel Pacheco’s administration (’02-06) will not be enforced.

The General Law of Immigration, approved in Oct ’05, was set to take effect on 12 Aug. However, the Executive Branch, which is critical of the law, submitted a bill to Congress to delay enactment until Dec ’07.

Although legislators said they could not possibly approve the bill by 12 Aug, Immigration Director Mario Zamora told *The Tico Times* that whether or not the law is deferred, Immigration cannot enforce it because it lacks the necessary funds. The law requires new police, infrastructure and administrative restructuring that would cost approximately \$13.5 million.

“It’s absolutely impossible for this administration to put [the law] in practice. The money doesn’t exist. The corresponding budgetary preparations weren’t made,” Public Security Minister Fernando Berrocal, who directs the General Immigration Administration, told *The Tico Times*.

After approval of the law in Oct, it published in the official congressional record *La Gaceta* on 12 Dec, with the stipulation that the government had eight months to implement it. However, in June '06, President Oscar Arias' brother and spokesman, Rodrigo Arias, said that the government would ask Congress to approve a 16-month delay in order to evaluate possible changes to the law. The Executive Branch submitted the bill to delay it on 27 July, which was published in *La Gaceta* on 3 Aug. Congress' Social Affairs Commission could begin to review it after that date.

The Immigration Law was created to update Costa Rica's '86 immigration codes to give police more freedom to search for and deport illegal immigrants.

The law increases penalties on companies that hire illegal workers, fines people who provide housing to illegal immigrants, and allows police to go through payrolls and company documents that relate to the hiring of foreigners.

The Roman Catholic Church has expressed opposition to the new immigration law. Monsignor Angel San Casimiro Fernández, president of the Church's Caritas social outreach organization, stated that, as it stands, the law "does little for the country's traditions of respect and promotion of human rights."

### **Astronaut Franklin Chang Inaugurates Rocket Lab**

In a ceremony held on 15 July, Costa Rican-born astronaut Franklin Chang inaugurated the new Ad Astra Rocket Lab in Liberia, Guanacaste.

The lab aims to develop a rocket propelled by plasma, a fourth state of matter composed of superheated gas with exorbitant temperatures similar to those inside the Sun, by '07. Also, Ad Astra seeks to send rockets to the International Space Station in '10-'11 and to construct of an "Ad Astra Lunar Tug" for transportation between the Earth and the moon by '15. Eventually, the lab will aim to build a rocket that can transport humans to Mars.

The lab was built in six months and its construction involved an investment of \$1 million for a 700-square-meter facility that includes offices, a workshop and conference halls. It was built on the Daniel Oduber campus of the School of Agriculture for the Humid Tropical Region (EARTH), a research center located just outside Liberia (the main campus of EARTH is located in Guácimo, Limón Province).

President Arias attended the inauguration ceremony along with several reputed scientists including Nobel Prize winning physicist Samuel C.C. Ting, Roald Sagdeev and the former director of the Soviet space program.

Chang said all the country's students are welcome to visit the lab, where constant tours will be offered.

—*Leland Baxter-Neal and María Gabriela Díaz*