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COSTA RICA

New Efforts to Combat Delinquency to be Implemented

Faced with the public's growing concern about their own safety, the Ministry of Public Security (MSP) is betting on improving police intelligence regarding criminal activities, adding more security cameras in public places, putting more police units on the streets, and acquiring more police vehicles and equipment during '07, to combat delinquency and improve citizen security.

By June '07, the MSP's goal is to have 1,800 additional police on the streets, 150 more police motorcycles, 20 more 4-wheel-drive vehicles, 70 more patrol cars and additional bicycles for patrolling city streets and tourist areas. The cost of these and other improvements will be financed by a 35% increase in the MSP budget, as well as by cooperation assistance from international organizations and foreign aid from friendly governments, especially from Taiwan.

"What we want to do is improve the police presence. This is going to change people's perception because it will increase their confidence. My philosophy is that the police should be out on the street," stated the Minister of Public Security, Fernando Berrocal, at a press conference on 2 Jan.

Part of the current problem is that there is only one police officer on the street for every 1,720 citizens. Out of a total police force of 9,500 officers, only about 2,500 are on the streets at a given time, with the remainder serving in administrative positions, incapacitated or off duty.

During '06, Costa Ricans experienced over 8,000 reported assaults, which is an average of 22 assaults daily in a nation four million inhabitants. Many of these assaults were armed robberies where violence was committed. Between Jan and Oct '06, the Judicial Investigation Organization registered 101 armed attacks on bus drivers and/or passengers, 49 of which took place in Limón and 47 in San José, usually between the hours of 6:00 pm and 11:00 pm. The nation's public buses transport about 80% of the population.

Also, the number of assaults with intent to commit robbery on automobile drivers, usually women traveling alone while stopped at traffic lights, has increased significantly in recent years. One hundred and eleven such assaults occurred between July and Dec '06 along the Ruta Periférica on the southwestern side of San José, which is a very heavily traveled beltway around the city, especially during rush hours.

In addition to assaults, the number of car thefts and home burglaries accounted for an average of 1,500 robberies monthly during '06, for a total of about 18,000, according to the MSP. On average, 14 vehicles were stolen daily throughout the nation.

The growth in delinquency has motivated many citizens and businesses to hire private security guards to protect life and property, mainly in the Greater San José Metropolitan Area (GAMSJ) where about 50% of the robberies were reported last year. The MSP has identified 13 cantons in GAMSJ as being the most dangerous places to live, work and shop, which is where the police presence will be greatly improved during the first half of '07.

The number of authorized private security companies in Costa Rica increased from 280 in '05 to 430 in '06, which is a 53% increase in 12 months. Currently, the number of private security guards is nearly triple the number of police officers, with 25,000 registered security guards and only 9,500 police officers. In addition, 215 "neighborhood watch" committees were organized in '06 by groups of neighbors in the GAMSJ to protect their neighborhoods and to improve crime prevention.

However, in addition to common delinquency, Costa Rican families face a growing threat from intrafamily violence. Every day the nation's 911 Emergency Assistance operators receive, on average, 117 calls from victims of domestic violence in process, which amounted to over 39,000 such calls between Jan and Nov of '06. "For many women in Costa Rica their homes are less secure than the streets," stated Jeanette Carillo of the National Women's Institute on 12 Dec. During '06, at least 31 women were murdered in Costa Rica at the hands of other family members or their domestic partners.

Chemical Plant Fire in Limon Causes Environmental Damage and Health Risks

The 12 Dec fire that destroyed the Químicos Holanda plant in Moín, located near the port city of Limón on the Caribbean coast, caused extensive environmental damage to air, land and sea; endangered the fresh water supply for 20,000 residents; posed health risks to an estimated 8,000 people who were exposed to toxic smoke; and raises security concerns regarding other chemical storage facilities in the country and the proper transportation of such materials.

In addition, the chemical foam used by firefighters to combat the blaze that burned for more than 14 hours added to the environmental damage by polluting nearby streams and wells and seeping into the subterranean water supply. Government officials estimated the cost of the firefighting efforts at about \$500,000 and the cost of the environmental cleanup at about \$300,000.

Apparently, the deadly fire was started by sparks from a welding torch that ignited fumes from liquid chemicals being transferred from the storage facility to a tanker truck at the Químicos Holanda plant. The resulting explosion and fire killed one worker instantly and seriously injured two other workers, who were taken to the Tony Facio Hospital in Limón in critical condition.

The intense fire produced enormous clouds of toxic smoke that billowed from the plant for many hours, causing panic among local residents and prompting emergency assistance personnel to evacuate a wide area near and downwind from the plant. At the time of the incident, the plant contained dozens of storage tanks filled with many toxic chemicals, including toluene, xileno, propanol, methanol, estileno, various alcohols and diesel fuel. One of these substances, toluene, is said to be the most toxic; plant officials estimated that their storage tanks contained about 118 tons of toluene on 12 Dec.

The health risks associated with prolonged exposure to these chemicals include respiratory problems, stomach pain, eye and skin irritations, cancer and possibly abortions. Health officials are continuing to examine people who were exposed to toxic fumes and contaminated water from this incident, including emergency service personnel. It was expected to take three or four months to determine the full impact of the toxins on the health of those affected.

According to Fire Chief Héctor Chávez, a previous study conducted by fire safety officials determined that Costa Rica lacks clear cut regulations about the proper storage of hazardous materials, and that most inspections of such storage facilities revealed general disorder in the management of hazardous materials: a lack of safety protocols, protection equipment, training of personnel, proper detection equipment for toxic fumes, etc. Also, many of the tanker trucks used to transport such materials lacked proper warning signs and indications of the chemicals being transported, and had corroded storage tanks, worn tires and mechanical problems for lack of proper maintenance. Chávez stated that these kinds of problems raise serious security concerns regarding the storage and transportation of hazardous materials in the country. During '06, firefighters attended to 758 emergency calls related to hazardous materials, 71 more than in '05.

Solid Economic Growth in '06 Reported

Costa Rica experienced an economic bonanza during '06, with inflation of only 9% (down from 14% in '05) and GDP growth at 7.7%, although income from tourism was up only slightly (about 4.5%) compared to last year. The economy also benefited from new foreign investment of about \$1.4 billion, especially in coastal areas where property development is growing in response to tourism demands, especially by US and Canadian investors. Exports grew by 18% compared to the same period of last year, with over \$8 billion in sales during '06. The Central Bank ended the year with international reserves of over \$3 billion.

However, the '06 State of the Nation report revealed that, since '86, the average income of the country's poorest homes has decreased by 13.9%, whereas the average income of the richest homes has increased by 67.9%. Despite small increases and decreases in poverty levels during the past decade, about 20% of the population remains below the poverty line, according to the National Institute of Statistics and Census.

—*Clifton L. Holland*