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COSTA RICA

Don Oscar Says Goodbye to Taiwan, Opens Arms to China

Hundreds of millions of dollars just were not enough. President Oscar Arias cut ties with Taiwan on 6 June in order to establish official diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China, saying that the booming economy of the world's most populous nation offered more than Taiwan, historically one of Costa Rica's most generous allies. Arias later called Taiwan "stingy," saying they could have offered more in the way of aid.

"I was always critical with the Taiwanese, and it is something I can say now, but I always told them ... you should be more generous if you want to have friends in the world, because every day you have fewer," Arias said.

Arias' switch in allegiances ended more than 60 years of Costa Rican support for Taiwan. It also launched speculation as to whether other Latin American allies like Nicaragua and Panama would follow suit. Taiwan is left with only 24 nations in its corner, while Costa Rica joins the 168 countries in the United Nations that recognize China.

An ongoing dispute over which government is the real government of China—the quasi-communists in mainland China criticized for overlooking human rights within its border, or the political descendents of Chiang Kai-shek, who fled to the island in 1949 to escape Mao Tse-Tung's revolutionary forces—has made relations with either country mutually exclusive.

"This decision is not due to any ideological change of direction or geopolitical reasons or joint interests; it is an act of fundamental realism; it is an awakening to the global context in which we must play a part," Arias said.

The Costa Rican government cemented ties with China during a secret, one-day visit to Peking on 1 June, where Foreign Minister Bruno Stagno and Finance Minister Guillermo Zuñiga met with the Chinese Foreign Minister, Yang Jiechi.

"A decision of such transcendence requires discrete diplomacy. We have been as transparent as the circumstances have allowed us," Arias said just six hours after he said rumors about a break in ties with Taiwan were "speculations."

Arias said he based his decision on the importance of opening Costa Rica's economy to China, a nation populated by 3.1 billion people or 20% of all humanity, and suggested the possibility of negotiating a free-trade agreement with the eastern giant.

The Taiwanese government, for its part, announced on 7 June an end to all financial aid and cooperation in Costa Rica, and Arias promised he would personally search for financing for projects—including the Naranjo-Florencia highway, the rebuilding of the Calderón Guardia Hospital and various projects in the Public Security Ministry—that the Taiwanese were going to fund.

Wang Xiaoyuan, China's envoy to Costa Rica, presented his credentials to Foreign Minister Bruno Stagno on 18 June as charge d'affaires, although he is set to have the rank of ambassador in the future.

Wang quickly announced a \$30,000 donation to help residents in the poor neighborhoods of Alajuela and Hatillo, where many homes were damaged by sudden and intense flooding, and unusual mini-tornadoes. He added that more Chinese officials were on the way to analyze what other projects the new ally might fund, mentioning both the Calderón Guardia Hospital restoration and the planned highway from San Ramón to San Carlos.

He also mentioned the possibility of installing a private, Chinese-owned oil refinery in Costa Rica and of purchasing Costa Rican government bonds.

Wang said the Chinese diplomatic delegation in San Jose is set to be large, since it is the Asian giant's first in Central America, a region of allies of rival Taiwan. He noted that Costa Rica will be important for China due to its position at the center of the Americas and to its potential to attract investment in a region where China has no other allies.

Bill Raises Question: How Gay-Friendly is Costa Rica?

The extent of Costa Rica's tolerance and commitment to equal rights will be put to the test with a new bill to create civil unions for gays and lesbians, say the bill's supporters.

The Roman Catholic Church and other opponents, however, have unsurprisingly come out against the proposed law, saying it would pervert the nation's values and approach a slippery slope into such practices as gay adoption and gay marriage.

The bill would allow gay couples to enter into officially sanctioned civil unions that would give them the same rights and privileges as heterosexuals in similar unions, such as shared insurance benefits and access to a partner's assets after his or her death.

The president of the Roman Catholic Episcopal Conference, Monsignor José Francisco Ulloa, told *The Tico Times* that the bill "simply can't be approved—it would mean accepting gay and lesbian marriage. The Church will never, never accept this."

He continued by saying that if the bill were to show progress in the National Assembly—which he doubted—Catholic officials would "have a talk with legislators who are Catholic, which is the majority."

Supporters, however, say it is about time that Costa Rica live up to its reputation of tolerance, and acknowledge the human rights of all of its citizens.

“The gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgendered of Costa Rica have all the same duties but not all of the rights,” said Abelardo Araya, a gay-rights activist. “This isn’t a bill that invents something new. These couples already exist.”

The bill’s supporters—including Ana Helena Chacón of the Social Christian Unity Party (PUSC), Andrea Morales of the Citizen Action Party (PAC), Carlos Manuel Gutiérrez of the Libertarian Movement (ML) and José Merino of the Broad Front—have been working on the law proposal since last year.

President Arias’ ruling National Liberation Party (PLN), with 25 legislators in the Legislative Assembly, has made no announcements about the bill, and spokeswoman Eugenia González said it is too early for the party to declare its position.

The Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court (Sala IV) ruled last year against lawyer Yashin Castrillo, who sued in ’03 for the right to marry his gay partner. Sala IV found that the constitutional protections and rights of marriage do not apply to homosexuals, but added that there is “an absence of adequate regulation” for same-sex unions.

Costa Rica’s Family Code law prohibits gay marriage, while Costa Rican criminal law prohibits such an offense against society with six months to three years in prison. Castrillo’s case is currently under consideration in the Inter-American Human Rights Commission.

Arias Wants Costa Rica Greener than Ever

President Arias is aiming to recapture Costa Rica’s title as the undisputed champion environmentalist by making it carbon-neutral by ’21.

Under the anti-global warming logic of the Kyoto Protocol, Arias hopes to plant enough trees and reduce the emission of greenhouse gasses to the point that the nation’s forests are ample enough to filter the country’s output.

Once touted as a model for environmental conservation and a pioneer of eco-tourism, out-of-control development along Costa Rica’s Pacific coast has tarnished this nation’s green sheen somewhat.

Arias’ goal has the potential to not only put Costa Rica’s back under the green limelight, but also to produce dividends.

Under the Kyoto Protocol, Costa Rica could sell carbon bonds on the international market—a system in which countries earn credits for reducing emissions below the Protocol-established quotas, and can then sell those credits to countries that exceed their quotas.

Early in June, to coincide with International Environment Day, Environment Minister Roberto Dobles kicked off a campaign to plant five million trees nationwide, joining a United Nations effort to plant one billion trees around the world in ’07.

Costa Rica also promotes reforestation through the National Forest Financing Fund (FONAFIFO), which uses Environmental Service Payments (PSAs)—cash handouts—as an incentive for landowners to protect existing forest or plant trees.

FONAFIFO has between \$14-16 million budgeted for payments this year and is aiming at reforesting 6,000 hectares (14,800 acres) with the PSAs. The funds come from a national gasoline tax.

—*Leland Baxter*