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COSTA RICA

Huge Anti-DR-CAFTA Protest Appears to Have Little Effect

Opponents of the Dominican Republic-Central American Free Trade Agreement with the US (DR-CAFTA) poured into the streets of San José and other parts of Costa Rica by the tens of thousands on 26 Feb in what has been described as the largest protest against free trade ever held in Costa Rica—and perhaps the world.

Boyeros—the traditional handlers of oxen and their carts—joined high school and college students, veterans of Costa Rica’s now-abolished army, union workers, teachers, priests, middle-class families and a wide cross-section of other sectors of Costa Rican society, and a few gringos as well. The march stretched over 22 city blocks at one point, from the San Juan de Díos Hospital on the Westside all the way to the Legislative Assembly on the Eastside, where protesters ended their march. The daily *La Nación* used aerial photographs to analyze the density of the parade participants, and estimated that about 23,000 people participated. Organizers claimed that 200,000 people protested across the country.

President Oscar Arias commended the organizers of the protest movement for the peaceful and orderly demonstration, but said his resolve in favor of the treaty would not be budged. Acknowledging that the treaty has some flaws, Arias insisted that Costa Rica needs the treaty, adding that, “all the polls here show the majority of Costa Ricans support DR-CAFTA, overwhelmingly.” The president also reiterated his often-heard affirmation that DR-CAFTA “is to be decided in the Legislative Assembly, not in the streets.” Supporters of the agreement in Congress say they have the two-thirds majority of 38 votes needed to pass it.

However, the bill’s passage through the tedious workings of the oft-criticized Assembly was held up in Feb when the courts agreed to hear a lawsuit challenging the Assembly’s approval of special fast-track legislation, which legislators want to apply to DR-CAFTA to force a speedy vote.

Opponents object to the fast-track, which is a reform to an existing Assembly regulation, similar to one former President Abel Pacheco attempted to apply to his controversial tax plan. That attempt was denied by the courts. The Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court (Sala IV), however ruled to

allow this fast-track reform, but concluded there had been a procedural error in the legislative process, and sent the bill back to commission. Pro-DR-CAFTA legislators had summarily dismissed without discussion a series of motions against the fast-track when it was originally discussed in commission, and those arguments must now be heard, the court said.

While the ruling—issued just days after the exultant protest—was a set-back for the anti-DR-CAFTA crowd, opponents are seeing a silver lining: that the same procedural error of dismissing opposing motions against the fast-track may have also occurred when DR-CAFTA was in commission. Further discussion of the trade agreement is expected to continue for at least a few months.

Cruise Tourist Kills Mugger, Stirs Concerns over Limón Safety

Costa Rica captured global attention when, in late Feb, a 70-year-old cruise ship passenger killed a 20-year-old would-be mugger in self-defense in the port city of Limón. The passenger—supposedly a former marine from Ohio, but whose identity remains a mystery to the world—was among a group of cruise ship passengers out for a day of sight seeing who asked to be driven to a hill in a seedy Limón neighborhood to get a photo of their cruise liner.

The attacker-turned-victim, Walter Segura, was one of three masked robbers who boarded the tourist bus, armed with a .38-caliber handgun. While accounts differ, it appears that at least one, if not the entire group of passengers, attacked the muggers, and the military veteran put Segura in a headlock, breaking his collar-bone. The other two attackers fled, and police pronounced Segura dead when they arrived. Autopsy reports said he died of asphyxiation.

After giving their statements to the police, the passengers were allowed to return to their ship, which is said to have departed 90 minutes later. Costa Rican police have refused to release the identity of the US man who killed Segura in self-defense, and the horde of press waiting in Miami, Florida, as the passengers arrived back in the US never discovered his identity. Whoever he was, he disembarked and did not reveal himself to the media.

Newspapers, television networks and bloggers around the world picked up the story, bringing international attention to Costa Rica's growing crime problem. Carnival Cruise Lines initially announced it was considering skipping over Costa Rica as a Caribbean stop, but later retracted when new safety measures were announced by Costa Rican Public Security authorities.

Costa Rican government officials responded quickly, looking to limit the damage to the nation's global reputation as a safe tourism destination. Tourism Minister Carlos Benavides and Public Security Minister Fernando Berrocal announced on 27 Feb that an increased police presence in Limón would be closely following the movement of cruise ship tourists in the city. Police officials will know when tour groups are scheduled to come ashore from the cruise ships, and will know the license plates of the tour buses. Tour operators who insist on taking passengers to dangerous areas could have their licenses revoked. Only four days after the original incident, a second group of tourists was mugged at the very same location.

Former Dundee Academy Owner Declared Innocent

A three-judge panel found US citizen Narvin Lichfield innocent of abusing the teens enrolled at his behavior-modification school, called Dundee Ranch Academy. The school, part of the highly controversial World Wide Association of Specialty Programs (WWASP), was shut down in '03 following a student riot and allegations of abuse and minors being held against their—and their parents'—will. A new, toned down school, Pillars of Hope, now operates out of the same facility.

Lichfield, who owned the school and whose brother founded WWASP, said he was “happy that the law and the system actually work,” but was upset by comments the judges made after issuing their ruling. The lead judge told Lichfield that she believed children were abused and mistreated at the center, but the court simply did not see evidence proving Lichfield had ordered the abuse.

Reports from the Children’s Welfare Office (PANI) and the Health Ministry both found mistreatment of the students, such as overcrowding and a lack of professional care. Two PANI officials testified during the proceedings that they saw evidence of mistreatment or neglect, and that students described abuse in anonymous questionnaires.

Some former students and their parents have alleged a variety of abuse that occurred at the center, which took a tough-love approach to straightening out supposedly troubled teens. Disciplinary measures of students included being forced to stand or kneel in a small room with their faces against a wall for 12 hours or longer. Students also described physical restraints that involved having their arms twisted up behind their backs, being thrown on the ground and having a knee shoved in their backs.

These accounts, however, were largely absent from the trial, as prosecutor Edgar Oviedo said he did not have the funds to bring former students to Costa Rica to testify. The prosecutor who originally investigated Dundee Ranch, Fernando Vargas, has complained that, since he was transferred from the case, it had been poorly handled. Prior to the proceedings, Oviedo insisted that his case was strong, and that it was based on the testimony taken from two students after the rioting and before they left the country. During the proceedings, however, he said the testimony of one of the students had “disappeared.” During his closing arguments, Oviedo said he could not present enough evidence linking Lichfield to the crimes for which he was accused.

—Leland Baxter-Neal