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COSTA RICA

Former President Arias Takes Office Again

Under the gaze of world leaders, Nobel-prize winners and the Costa Rican people, Oscar Arias Sánchez was sworn in as the new president of Costa Rica on 8 May at the National Stadium in San José.

Arias, who ran a confident campaign under the green-and-white banner of the National Liberation Party (PLN), barely squeaked a victory past Ottón Solís of the Citizens Action Party (PAC) after a ballot recount, and assumed the presidency for the second time in 20 years.

After the new president of the Legislative Assembly removed the presidential sash from a relieved Abel Pacheco in the official ceremony at the stadium and laid it across Arias' chest, the new president promised the Costa Rican people that he would be a decisive leader.

“We cannot continue wandering without direction, interminably discussing amongst ourselves, pursuing the illusion of unanimity,” Arias said. “We cannot give ourselves the luxury of irresolution. We have arrived at a crossroads and must make decisions.”

Speaking to a stadium filled with approximately 15,000 people, Arias repeated many of the same themes from his campaign—promises to improve education, attend to poverty, fix failing infrastructure and be tough on crime and even tougher on the root causes of crime.

While Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez had initially said he would be in the audience—and would have been the only leftist South American leader to attend—he cancelled at the last minute, citing other pressing engagements. His cancellation pulled the plug on plans for a face-to-face meeting with Arias to discuss Venezuela providing Central America with oil under preferential conditions.

Though Chávez did not make it, other important international figures did, including the Spanish Prince Felipe de Borbón, and US' First Lady, Laura Bush. Ever the champion of education and Literacy, Bush met with Arias' education minister and visited an elementary school in Heredia.

In addition, Arias welcomed the presidents of every Central American nation (except Belize), Mexican President Vincent Fox, Colombian President Alvaro Uribe, and Taiwanese President Chen Shui-bian.

Arias, who won a Nobel Peace Prize in '87 for his efforts in the Central American peace process, was also joined by fellow Nobel laureates such as Rigoberta Menchú, from Guatemala; Betty Williams, from Ireland; and Polish unionist leader and former President Lech Walesa.

In his first day as president, Arias met with the president of Taiwan and the Secretary General of the Organization of American States. From Chen, Arias received a pledge of \$15 million to go towards the reconstruction of the Calderón Guardia Hospital, which was partially destroyed in a fatal blaze in July '05.

Arias, who has suggested that Costa Rica's recognition of Taiwan as a nation separate from Mainland China could see its final days under his administration, said that "for the moment" diplomatic relations between Costa Rica and Taiwan would remain as they are.

Arias also met with his Central American counterparts over breakfast, before his inauguration, and discussed plans to face the European Union (EU) as a unified force at a summit with the European Union in Vienna later that week, especially in the face of a possible free trade agreement between the EU and the Isthmus.

Following his first Cabinet meeting in the afternoon, Arias got right to work on two of the central themes of his campaign: the battle against poverty and for education. The new president signed a decree that gives poor mothers \$79-98 a month if they keep their kids in high school. The decree launches a program that benefits 13,000 students initially and will eventually expand to include 140,000 students.

New Administration Greeted with Protests

From 1 to 8 May, protestors gathered for three manifestations against Arias' policy: opposition to DR-CAFTA and his proposal to transfer his presidential headquarters from the current *Casa Presidencial* in Zapote to the National Cultural Center (CENAC) downtown.

At 10:15 a.m. on 1 May, a crowd of an estimated 5,000 peaceful protestors met outside La Merced Church to march down Avenida Segunda, transforming the annual international Labor Day march into an anti DR-CAFTA demonstration. Organized by labor union representatives; environmentalists; human-rights activists; feminist groups; members of the gay, lesbian, sexual and transgender community; and university students all gathered at the protest, among other groups. The march drew to a close at approximately 2 p.m. next to the National Museum, near the Legislative Assembly building where the newly-elected legislators were taking office for the term that started that day.

By 5 May, Arias' proposal to relocate his presidential headquarters to CENAC during the first half of his administration had given cause for members of the country's cultural sector—including writers, musicians, painters and dancers—to raise their voices in protest at España Park, outside the CENAC.

The crowd gathered there for a demonstration that went on from 11:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m., and involved holding hands to form a human chain that embraced the 150-year old CENAC building, former home to the National Liquor Factory.

Protestors from this manifestation also participated in the 8 May anti DR-CAFTA march. Once again protestors set out from La Merced Church after 10:00 a.m., this time advancing down Paseo Colón to the headquarters of the National Electricity Institute (ICE) in La Sabana, the closest point to the National Stadium that police would let them approach.

Approximately 1,000 labor union representatives, university students, feminists and other groups, this time joined by protesters of the CENAC closure, waved anti DR-CAFTA banners, chanted anti-Arias slogans, and shouted “the press has been sold to the bourgeoisie,” *The Tico Times* reported.

Costa Rica to Produce Banana Plastic?

Recent research by the University of Costa Rica (UCR) and the National Banana Corporation (CORBANA) has shown that bananas that do not meet export standards can be used to produce biodegradable plastic and ethanol.

The groundbreaking investigation, started three years ago by UCR’s National Science and Food Technology Center (CITA), revealed that rejected bananas, which added up to 322,000 tons in 2005, could be used as the raw material for these two products.

According to project investigator and CITA director Carmela Velásquez, production of polylactic acid, used in making the plastic, and ethanol, the main ingredient in bioethanol—fuel that generates less toxic emissions—has never before been evaluated using bananas.

She explained that biodegradable plastic is the application that interests researchers most. “This plastic is attractive for biomedical applications. Instead of a metal fracture pin that will set off all airport detectors, the body will absorb it. You don’t have to remove it,” Velásquez told *The Tico Times*.

The acid is produced through microbiological fermentation, a process that involves ripening the bananas, turning them into pulp, and fermenting them via a microorganism that changes the fruit’s sugars into lactic acid.

During the investigation, ethanol was produced from bananas with a laboratory bioreactor, a machine that brings about the fermentation process necessary to obtain alcohol. So far, production of ethanol and biodegradable plastic has worked in small numbers, and has not been tested on an industrial level.

The project was financed by the Ministry of Science and Technology that supplied ¢23 million, the Costa Rica-United States Foundation (CR-USA) that contributed ¢6 million, and the National Banana Corporation (CORBANA) that supported the project with ¢5 million.

—Leland Baxter-Neal and
María Gabriela Díaz

