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COSTA RICA

Major Anti-CAFTA Protests Held

Thousands of anti-CAFTA (the US-Dominican Republic-Central American Free Trade Agreement) protestors peacefully marched and held rallies and press conferences on 23-24 Oct in the nation's major cities, in anticipation of imminent CAFTA discussions in the Legislative Assembly before year's end.

The largest demonstrations took place in San José, where an estimated 7,000-10,000 protestors marched from six different starting points in the capital city to the steps of the Legislative Assembly on both days. However, 85% of the population said they did not support the anti-CAFTA protests, according to a CID-Gallup poll published in *La República* on 24 Oct.

The anti-CAFTA movement is led by leaders of several major unions—the National Association of Public and Private Employees (ANEP), the Association of ICE Employees (the Costa Rican Institute of Electricity, known as ICE), the Union of Social Security Fund Employees (UNDECA), the Association of Secondary Education Professors (APSE), etc.—under the umbrella of “The National Coordination of the Anti-CAFTA Struggle.”

Also participating in the anti-CAFTA movement are the Internal Front of ICE Workers, the University of Costa Rica (UCR) Student Federation, professors and students of other public universities, the Limón Civic Committee, UPANACIONAL (National Union of Small and Medium Agricultural Producers), CONARROZ (National Rice Growers Association), and numerous other social, agricultural and *campesino* organizations.

As early as 28 Mar, the UCR's University Council approved a motion to recommend that the nation's Legislative Assembly reject CAFTA due to its perceived “grave political, economic and social consequences for the country.” Fueled by fears and speculation about the possible indirect impact of CAFTA on public education, tens of thousands of public school teachers and students have been mobilized to participate in the anti-CAFTA movement. However, the issue of public education is not included in the anti-CAFTA arguments presented by the Citizens' Action Party (PAC), currently the nation's second-largest political group.

Noticeably absent from the 23-24 Oct public marches and protests was former presidential candidate Ottón Solís, head of PAC, one of the most outspoken critics of CAFTA in the media. He told reporters that, while respecting the citizens' right to protest peacefully in public places, he prefers to concentrate his efforts on a discussion of the pros and cons of CAFTA by PAC legislators in the chambers of the Legislative Assembly before a special commission established for this purpose, prior to its presentation to the full body for discussion and a final vote on its ratification.

All that members of this special legislative commission can do is to discuss and approve a series of "interpretive motions" to clarify the Spanish text of CAFTA before sending to the plenary session for debate and a final vote, which is scheduled for 12 Dec.

When the final vote is taken in the Legislative Assembly, it will be a yes or no decision regarding the approval of CAFTA. No modifications of any kind can be made to the existing CAFTA document, because this international treaty has already been negotiated and approved in principal by all the participating countries, most of whom have already ratified it.

At the moment, it appears that the administration of President Oscar Arias Sánchez, of the National Liberation Party (PLN), has enough public and political support to ensure the approval of CAFTA before the end of the year or during the extraordinary legislative sessions scheduled for the period 1 Dec to 30 April '07. As of 28 Oct, President Arias enjoyed a 60% favorable approval rate, according to a CID-Gallup public opinion poll published by *La República*. In addition, 63% of those polled said they believed President Arias would fulfill his '05 campaign promises, and 53% said that the Arias administration would leave the country better off at the end of the term than at the beginning. One of Arias' campaign promises was to ensure the approval of CAFTA, and 53% of those polled supported its ratification.

If CAFTA is approved by the Legislative Assembly, this body must approve a total of 13 new laws that are prerequisites for the treaty to become operational. The Costa Rican government has until 1 Jan '08 to ratify CAFTA and approve all the required legislation, and to notify all the other signature countries that it has complied with all the necessary requirements for membership in CAFTA.

Fishing Boats Captured with Drugs and Human Cargo

On 9 Oct, the Costa Rican Coast Guard captured a Costa Rican fishing boat, the *Coopepez VI*, in the Pacific Ocean with 3,500 kilos of cocaine. Anti-drug agents arrested the three Costa Rican crew members, who are local fishermen from Puntarenas with no previous criminal record.

On 14 Oct, US and Costa Rican naval vessels rescued 70 Chinese and 58 Peruvians found aboard a 54-foot Peruvian fishing boat adrift in the Pacific Ocean, about 91 nautical miles southwest of Cabo Blanco, on Costa Rica's Nicoya Peninsula. The Peruvian captain and crew of the *Nalu*, whose motors malfunctioned, had already abandoned ship in a life-boat, leaving their human cargo of flea and lice-infected undocumented migrants to their own fate with little food or water, before the coast guard vessels arrived on the scene. Later, Costa Rican immigration officials determined that the rescued Chinese nationals, who had been recruited by a criminal gang in mainland China three months previously, were offered

free travel to North America via Peru in exchange for working 20 years as “indentured servants” upon arrival at their destination in Mexico or the US.

On 22 Oct, a joint anti-drug patrol of US, Colombian and Costa Rican coast guard agents captured a Costa Rican fishing boat with eight tons of cocaine near the Galapagos Islands, off the west coast of Ecuador. The vessel, based in Playas de Coco, Guanacaste, carried a crew of four Costa Ricans and two “foreigners” (assumed to be Colombians). It was later determined that the vessel, the *Calipso V*, was purchased in July by two unknown Colombians who registered the boat in the name of a young, homeless drug-addict, who was paid about \$1,000 to sign the legal papers.

Extradition Approved for Colombian Mass Murderer

On 26 Oct, the Court of Justice in Puntarenas approved an extradition order for Héctor Orlando Martínez Quinto, who is accused of committing a list of capital offenses in Colombia, including the massacre of more than 100 people in Boyacá, Colombia, while serving with the Revolutionary and Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).

The Attorney General of Colombia said that Martínez is a key member of the FARC who posed as a fisherman in Costa Rica, where he purchased illegal weapons, munitions and explosives and smuggled them to his comrades in Colombia.

Apparently, Martínez entered Costa Rica illegally prior to Mar '00 when he married a Costa Rican woman (who has been in jail in San José since '04, accused of murder and robbery) and took up residence in the port of Puntarenas. When detained by a special police unit in Cocal de Puntarenas on 10 Aug, Martínez was carrying an official Costa Rica residence carnet with his name on it, which immigration officials said was obtained fraudulently.

15 IDA Officials Arrested for Fraud

On 18 Oct, judicial authorities arrested 12 current employees and three ex-employees of the Institute of Agrarian Development (IDA) for fraud and illicit enrichment, involving the illegal distribution of government lands to family members and friends.

According to the Public Ministry (MP), the accused were captured in a simultaneous police operation in Orotina de Alajuela, Paquero and Esparza de Puntarenas, Guácimo de Limón and Santo Domingo de Heredia. According to the MP, between '93 and '99, these corrupt IDA employees (including administrative, technical and auxiliary personnel) fraudulently distributed 43 farmland properties in Orotina, Turubares, Esparza and Paquera, totaling 689,000 square meters (69 hectares).

These anomalies, which occurred in the IDA Central-Pacific Regional Office, were first brought to light by a Nov '05 investigative report in the daily *La Nación* that led to an extensive 10-month investigation by the Fraud Section of the Office of Judicial Investigation (OIJ). The OIJ determined that the accused conspired to defraud the government of abandoned rural properties, acquired by IDA for distribution to landless rural families, that were illegally transferred to family members and friends. Also, some of the corrupt IDA officials falsified legal documents so that the properties in question could be sold by the beneficiaries without having to wait the required 15-years as stipulated by law.

Costa Rican Indigenous Leaders Hold Conference

Official representatives of the 24 Indigenous Territories of Costa Rica met from 12-15 Oct in the community of Shiroles, Territory of Talamanca Bribri, to celebrate the “2006 Indigenous Intercultural Conference,” which coincided with the national “Day of the Cultures” holiday on 12 Oct. Other invited guests and observers also attended.

This important event, sponsored by the Costa Rican Indigenous Movement, provided the participants with an opportunity to reflect upon the past, present and future of the Indigenous people in Costa Rica and the Americas, and upon their daily cultural, social, spiritual, environmental, political and economic struggle. The central themes discussed were:

- Dialogue with the Legislative Assembly regarding Indigenous rights.
- Children and adolescents in Indigenous communities.
- The proposed law project (drafted 15-years ago and never addressed by the Legislative Assembly) for the Autonomous Development of the Costa Rican Indigenous People: Worldview, Autonomous Development, National and International Jurisprudence.
- Alternatives for Sustainable Development in Indigenous Territories: Organic Agriculture, Eco and Ethnic Tourism, Indigenous Health and Indigenous Education.
- The UN Declaration on The Rights of the Indigenous Peoples.

The final Declaration, signed by the 65 official Indigenous representatives, called upon the government, public institutions, national and international cooperative agencies, mass media, social movements and general public to respect and support the legitimate Indigenous leadership of the respective official Indigenous Territories. At the same time, the delegates denounced a few unscrupulous, fraudulent and manipulative “false leaders” of the Costa Rican Indigenous Movement, such as Benjamín Mayorga Mora (a former professional soccer player who was born in Talamanca to Bribri parents who migrated to San José when Benjamin was four-years old), who has been mentioned in the local press as being “a spokesperson” for the Indigenous Peoples of Costa Rica, as he, himself, allegedly claimed to be.

The Declaration denounced Mayorga for conspiring with “assistencialist and paternalistic” persons and organizations—including a few politicians, government agencies and non-Indigenous elements—that “promote cooperation simply for their own economic self-interest in a systematic, unscrupulous and degrading manner for the purpose of usurping land in the Indigenous Territories.”

—*Clifton L. Holland*