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COSTA RICA

Crime and Security Issues

Recent polls indicate that crime and a general sense of insecurity are the primary concerns among Costa Ricans. According to the Organization of Judicial Investigation (OIJ), in the first semester of this year there were 2,367 assaults, 177 more than in the same period of '05. The OIJ estimates the number of holdups and robberies to be higher, but they are not being reported due to a lack of confidence in the police and judicial authorities to investigate and convict those responsible.

In the past three years, the sale of firearms has risen by 118%, now totaling 155,000 registered firearms, which does not include the number of weapons sold on the black market. The overall atmosphere of insecurity motivates some citizens to buy them as a means of self-defense.

This climate of insecurity is associated with the country's inability to respond to an increase in organized crime. Fernando Berrocal, the Minister of Public Security, has presented the Colombia government with the names 18,000 Colombians currently living in Costa Rica (10,000 have refugee status, 8,000 are legal residents) for the purpose of conducting criminal background checks. He said he does not wish to discriminate against Colombians, but the countries are working together to fight crimes that link them together, such as organized crime and drug trafficking.

A series of recent maritime drug busts have demonstrated an increase in the participation of Costa Ricans in international drug trafficking with Colombians. A fishing boat with four Costa Ricans was detained off the coast of Panama on 23 Sep. The boat, which is registered in Puntarenas, Costa Rica, contained 621 kilos of cocaine and 34 kilos of heroin. Three days later, on another fishing boat registered in Puntarenas, three more Costa Ricans were detained by Guatemalan authorities, who confiscated 125 kilos of cocaine. In Nicaragua on 5 Oct, two more Costa Rican fishing boats were searched by the Nicaraguan Navy. One boat carried a total of 145 kilos of cocaine, the other had no drugs but was transporting illegal shark fins. On 9 Oct, the US Coast Guard captured four Costa Rican fishermen in a boat off the coast of Guatemala with 3,500 kilos of cocaine with an estimated US street value \$400 million. This was the largest amount of cocaine ever confiscated in Central America.

In order to help combat the current crime wave, Berrocal created a strategic alliance between the police force and 18 private security firms, which was signed on 27 Sep. Currently there are 9,600 police officers, or 1 for every 1,538 residents. The new initiative will not give private security agents the same authority as police officers, but they will act as watchdogs and informants for the police.

OIJ and Public Security officials agree that more initiatives need to be taken to fight crime and improve the public security infrastructure: police stations, vehicles, weapons, bullet-proof vests, training, etc., and that international financial assistance is needed to achieve this.

CAFTA: The Struggle Will be in the Streets

Although the actual effects of implementing CAFTA in Costa Rica are unknown, it is apparent that strong ideological forces are either promoting or opposing the treaty, leaving Costa Rican citizens polarized. Costa Rica has signed the CAFTA agreement but is the only participating Central American country that has not yet ratified it. Some business, political and social sector actors believe that accepting CAFTA is necessary for the modernization of the country, while others vehemently oppose its ratification, mainly due to the alleged negative consequences for some people personally and financially. In the past month the CAFTA issue has ignited calls for a national referendum (it would be the first in Costa Rican history), and has been the cause of several public protests against CAFTA.

According to a poll taken by *La Nación* on 20 Sep, 51% of Costa Ricans are in support of the agreement, and believe that CAFTA will benefit the country overall. In another poll conducted by the University of Costa Rica (UCR) on 18 Sep, 63.2% of Costa Ricans think CAFTA has been negotiated behind the backs of the citizens. A study conducted by UNIMER for *La Nación* on 22 Sep indicated that citizen knowledge about the trade agreement is minimal; 24 out of every 100 people surveyed said they know “very little” about CAFTA, and 72.9% think that the agreement will benefit the US more than Costa Rica.

Members of the Citizen’s Action Party (PAC), opponents of CAFTA, argue that social protest will increase as the pros and cons of CAFTA are debated in the Legislative Assembly. PAC legislators have said that the administration of President Oscar Arias and other members of the National Liberation Party (PLN) are hiding the realities of CAFTA from public awareness.

Demonstrators in recent protests against CAFTA claim that an increased police presence has hindered their ability to protest peacefully. Anti-CAFTA union leaders and some university students are threatening that this issue, if not given the right channel for more open dialogue, there will be open rebellion in the streets. Protests during Costa Rica’s Independence Day celebrations in Cartago on 15 Sep led to the arrest of three university students while others were temporarily detained. Some of these students claimed that police officers used violence and unnecessary force. Berrocal admits that he has increased security measures, but denies that this has anything to do with recent protests. UCR students say that anti-CAFTA protests will continue and that an increased police presence could provoke violence or at least have negative consequences for the country.

ICE Modernization Controversy Reemerges

Controversy surrounding the “strengthening” and “opening” of the Costa Rican Electricity Institute (ICE) to competition was refueled after ICE president Jorge Gutiérrez resigned on 13 Sep, allegedly for “health reasons,” after just four months in office.

ICE workers and members of opposition political parties claim that the Arias administration and the Minister of Energy and Environment, Roberto Dobles, had different agendas than Gutiérrez, and that the new president of ICE, Pablo Quirós, is a more compatible fit with Arias’ plan to modernize ICE and “open” the nation’s telecommunications sector. PAC members signaled that Gutiérrez and Dobles had “serious differences” about the initiative to modernize ICE. The proposed reform

contains two official parts, called the Law to Strengthen and Modernize ICE and the General Telecommunications Law.

Gutiérrez claimed that his resignation has nothing to do with conflicts of interest with the current administration. “At this moment I need to make a decision between my health and my job,” he said at a press conference. President Arias denied that Gutiérrez’ departure would affect the process to strengthen ICE and open the telecommunications sector to competition, including Internet and cellular phone service.

Legislators from PAC, the Libertarian Movement and the Social Christian Unity Party have demanded that the proposals to modernize ICE be submitted immediately to the Legislative Assembly. Rodrigo Arias, the Minister of the Presidency and brother of President Arias, stated on 20 Sep that these reforms and initiatives are being prepared and will be submitted soon. Some legislators believe that gradual reform over three years would be sufficient to implement needed changes in ICE, though Dobles has said that these reforms would be implemented simultaneously with the ratification of CAFTA.

—Rick Pittenger