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Presidential Summit Approves Single Regional Passport

by LADB Staff

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The Cumbre Centroamericana held in Tegucigalpa Feb. 2 resulted in a unique initiative mixed in with more mundane agenda items. The meeting at the Presidential Palace featured an item first put forth by Honduran President Ricardo Maduro.

In early January, Maduro floated the idea of a single passport for citizens of all Central American countries, much like the European Union (EU) passport. It was Maduro who called the summit, in his capacity as president pro tempore of the Sistema de la Integración Centroamericana (SICA). Maduro said at that time that he intended to use his SICA position to press for the single passport as part of an overall program of strengthening regional security, reducing violence and crime, unifying customs procedures, and facilitating the traffic of people across borders.

At the summit, the presidents rallied round the passport idea and scheduled a meeting of their foreign ministers to work out the details. The presidents also invited technical experts from the Organización Internacional para las Migraciones (OIM) to help the ministers with the process. The ministers met over the Feb. 12-13 weekend and announced at the conclusion that the single passport initiative would be ready for signing in June 2005. They also completed work on a project to allow arrest warrants to be executed between countries.

President Antonio Saca of El Salvador brought the arrest-warrant initiative to the table at the summit, and it, too, won approval. "This could help with the crime issue," said Saca's Foreign Minister Francisco Lainez. It would require parallel legislation in each of the countries. Gangs, missiles, and bananas In other business, the presidents agreed to put together a regional summit on the international gang problem (see NotiCen, 2004-06-24), and to fight, or at least reject, the European Union (EU) proposal to raise the tariff on bananas exported from Latin America. The EU has said that the nearly fourfold increase is negotiable, and the presidents want it modified to guarantee access to the European market at least at current levels (see NotiCen, 2005-01-13).

The fear is that the EU plan so prejudices the market in favor of Caribbean and African countries that Central American producers will see their exports dwindle. SICA was created in 1991 by the Central American presidents and is headquartered in El Salvador. The original membership was limited to Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama. Later, Mexico and the Dominican Republic became regional observers, with Spain and Taiwan as extra-regional observers.

At the media conference that followed the summit, Nicaragua's President Enrique Bolanos told reporters that his country's stockpile of old Soviet Sam-7 missiles constituted a threat. He used this opportunity to announce that he would negotiate with Nicaragua's Asamblea Nacional (AN) to destroy them. "We are negotiating with the AN to permit the continued destruction of [the missiles]." The missiles are leftovers from the contra war, acquired by the Sandinista government.

The Army had about 2,000 of them stored, half of which have already been destroyed in response to pressure from the US. Bolanos said, "In the long run, they are a threat, even to Nicaragua, should just one escape. We have to exert the greatest possible control. We are sure that none are out of our control, but something could happen all of a sudden." He also said there is an agreement among all the Central American countries to reduce arms regionally.

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