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Four days into his new job, Costa Rica's Security Minister José María Tijerino found himself facing a complex reality a massive lack of police discipline.

On the morning of May 12, the minister went on a surprise tour of San José, the Costa Rican capital, and its outskirts to see how his subordinates were complying with his order to increase, as of that day, nationwide patrolling by the Fuerza Pública, this Central American nation's police. To his astonishment – and annoyance – the order had been massively ignored.

A couple of agents were, at mid-morning, leisurely having breakfast at a sodita (popular restaurant), and a local police official had no idea where his subordinates were, among other situations the country's top security official discovered.

Back at Ministerio de Seguridad Pública (MSP) headquarters, Tijerino held a noon press conference, reported what he had witnessed, and revealed the state of the police force in Costa Rica – a country that abolished its Army in 1948.

Among that morning's major findings was that close to 80% of the Fuerza Pública's officers were not working, he told local reporters and foreign correspondents. The global figure was 9,789 – around 75% of the 12,911 officers – who were on leave, he pointed out.

Detailed numbers showed that 6,435 were "on sick leave," 3,099 had suffered a "labor accident," 217 had been in a "traffic accident," and 38 were "on maternity leave," said the minister, reading from an official document.

Quoting information provided by the MSP's personnel department, Tijerino then added that, on average, Fuerza Pública officers take sick leave twice a year for 15 days at a time, adding up to 70,000 days of absence. "This confirms the bad shape the police force is in," he underlined, going on to mention the "aberrant, absurd situations" he encountered during that morning's surprise tour.

"The exercise...allowed us to measure the degree of efficiency in carrying out orders," said the government official, adding that he was thus able to verify that in the country's police force there is "little capability to understand orders such as that of [increased patrolling]."

Tijerino nevertheless mentioned successful Fuerza Pública operations carried out that day, which led to the arrest of four drug pushers, some operating inside schools, and said such actions showed "how police presence...prevents crime."
Field trip leads to successful workshop with chiefs

That morning's events – a situation that was corrected in the afternoon – led Tijerino to meet behind closed doors, three days later, with mid-level police officials. The four-hour long meeting on May 15 was satisfactory inasmuch as it allowed for a direct, honest exchange between local chiefs and their boss during which it became clear there had not been insubordination but confusion regarding the initially ignored order, the Minister told journalists after the lengthy talk.

"Someone even confessed that he thought the order was yet another one of those papers he routinely receives and didn't read it," Tijerino said, using the incident as an example, and he also pointed out that, during the meeting, "there was a very brave admission of responsibility and a firm commitment to carry out their jobs and be better chiefs."

"Guidelines were issued" during the meeting, "according to which, if discipline problems were detected, as some officials admitted, relevant procedures were to be enforced," he added.

The guidelines stipulate that chiefs "should inform the minister personally on cases requiring disciplinary procedures for us to give them follow up," he explained. "But I also advised them not to be unfair and try not to cover up their own negligence in issuing orders by passing it on to their subordinates, that would be the worst."

"That's why I want to supervise these disciplinary procedures," the minister pointed out, and immediately assured his chiefs that "I'm not going to interfere with the procedure, because that would be illegal, but I want to closely follow that up."

"What's most important to highlight from this workshop is that most solutions, the bulk of the solutions the group proposed are solutions that are within reach, that it's up to them," including "supervision, induction, motivation, and putting order in [police] stations," said the minister.

The workshop also produced "something very positive, a commitment, a major commitment and full awareness that this is a continuing effort," and that with policemen now out on the streets "supervision must be constant," said Tijerino. "They also know the minister will come talk to any police officer, anywhere in the country, before talking to the [local] chief."

"I told them, 'Don't be surprised if word gets to you that the minister is talking with one of your police at a park or in front of a school and you didn't even know the minister was going to go there, because this is my way of doing my job,'" he added.

During her successful election campaign, Costa Rican President Laura Chinchilla made security one of the main pillars of her political platform (see NotiCen, 2010-03-25).

Regarding citizen safety, in this country with a little more than 4.6 million people, official figures show the general crime rate per 100,000 inhabitants skyrocketed from 135 in 1990 to 295 in 2006.
Specifically on homicide, the Fiscalía General de la República (FRG) said the number per 100,000 inhabitants rose from just under six in 1993 to between 12 and 14 in 2008.

**Lack of security a top concern for Costa Ricans**

The percentage went up ten points in four years, from January 2006 to early this year, according to poll results published Jan. 21, which also showed that the percentage of homes where at least one family member was held up during the same period rose in the same proportion.

"While in early 2006 some 35% of those interviewed said the lack of security was their main concern, today it is around 45%," reported the local daily La República. Simultaneously, the number of homes with at least one member a victim of a holdup rose from 20% to 30%.

After the brief police storm four days into the 2010-2014 term, on May 25, Chinchilla’s administration announced several measures by the newly created Consejo Presidencial de Seguridad Ciudadana y Paz Social. They include holding a broad, nationwide consultation process sometime soon on an integral and sustainable citizen-safety policy, for which a cooperation agreement is to be signed with the UN Development Programme (UNDP), according to an announcement by Tijerino during the weekly government press conference.

The consultation is one of the five priorities set by the council, which also include "improving and strengthening the police force and the jail system," as well as "crime prevention and control," said the minister, adding the goals of "fighting impunity" and "fighting drug trafficking and organized crime."

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