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## **Costa Rica: Government asks Citizens what Country's Security Should Look Like**

by *George Rodriguez*

Category/Department: Costa Rica

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For years, security—or the increasing lack thereof—has been one of the major concerns Costa Ricans voice, even topping poverty and unemployment, which are also on the rise.

President Laura Chinchilla's administration—in power since May 8 (see NotiCen, 2010-05-13)—wants to know first hand what the people, quite critical of past governments on this issue in particular, think should be the contents of a new, wide-ranging, long-lasting, security policy. So, it is reaching out to citizens and organizations for what it considers will be a most valuable input to its effort to get this Central American nation back on its feet regarding security.

In Costa Rica, a country of some 4.6 million people, official estimates show crime in general rose during the 1990-2006 period from 135 to 295 incidents per 100,000 people, and the homicide rate jumped, in 1993-2008, from almost six to 14 per 100,000 inhabitants.

Recent poll results published by one of the country's major newspapers showed that, in answer to the question, "Which national issues should be a priority for the Chinchilla administration in its first 100 days?" 40.1% of respondents said "security." Other top issues were "reducing poverty" (10.7) and "education" (7.6).

This country's latest social figures for 2008-2009 show poverty at 18.5%—up 0.8 points—while extreme poverty went up 0.7 points, to 4.2%. Unemployment has also been increasing, having jumped almost three points during the same period, from 4.9% to 7.8%.

### ***Presidential citizen-security council created***

Answering society's call for improved security, on May 25 Chinchilla's administration announced its priorities in this field and said it had enlisted the UN Development Programme (UNDP) to support drawing up a security law. It also reported that it would increase the number of police officers in communities and schools nationwide.

Such were the results of the first monthly meeting held by the newly created presidential citizen-security council (Consejo Presidencial de Seguridad Ciudadana y Paz Social).

"Five priority goals were set on which the council is to focus its coordinating and monitoring task," Security Minister José María Tijerino told a press conference. The tasks include "improving and strengthening the police and the penitentiary system," as well as "preventing and controlling crime" and "combating drug trafficking and organized crime." The tasks also encompass "the consultation on an integral, sustainable, long-term policy for citizen safety."

In this regard, "a cooperation agreement was reached between UNDP and the presidency" aimed at "carrying out a wide-ranging consultation process during the early months of this administration," Tijerino further explained.

Ten communities and 20 education centers were selected to carry out what Tijerino described as "integral interventions to control and prevent violence" in schools, a critical component of the citizen-safety crisis hitting Costa Rica.

"This is a new approach in the struggle against crime--not repression but integral intervention," Tijerino said, adding that it implies "police presence, police persecution of criminals, but also [implementation of] social programs the state may produce."

### *Chinchilla calls for national consultation*

Less than a month later, on June 16, Chinchilla launched the national consultation (Consulta Nacional para la Elaboración de una Política Integral y Sostenible de Seguridad Ciudadana y Promoción de la Paz Social). Organized by the UNDP, the 60-day process will provide the necessary input for the policy to be drawn up, said the president, adding that each Costa Rican has a contribution to make in overcoming the lack of citizen safety the country faces.

The three-chapter, 28-page invitation to participate states that "crime and lack of security are the main social problems in Costa Rica," thus there is "the need to provide the country with an integral and sustainable citizen-safety policy, presently nonexistent."

"It is essential to commit all of society's sectors, so they are also a part of the solution," which in turn implies "that all citizens with something to say and something to contribute listen to the call for this consultation," the president told those at the launching ceremony at the Museo de los Niños, which operates in the remodeled National Penitentiary building.

"All of Costa Rica is calling for an integral and sustainable policy, a policy built on contributions from ample and varied sectors of society and sustained beyond the period of a single administration," underlined the head of state. "After the next sixty days, the consultation will be over and we will have a public-policy instrument to combat crime in its multiple facets."

Local UNDP officials said the consultation is open to all who wish to take part, which can be done through various means, including an Internet site, Facebook, a telephone number, and in person.

The government's decision to ask the people what they want to see in the security policy drew favorable comments from Jorge Rojas, director of the Organismo de Investigación Judicial (OIJ), Costa Rica's judicial investigation police. "I've always publicly stated...that this is an integral issue," Rojas told NotiCen, and he warned that "lack of security is not solved with police alone, and, although it's true that the police is a very important topic, social investment can't be left out."

"Citizen participation...involvement in this...is fundamental as well," and "only...with everyone participating is it possible to start working on the issue with the hope that the situation changes," said the OIJ director. "I'm not saying that we should quit modern laws, technological instruments are also for the police, better response capability for the police. However, if there's no social investment...if there's no thought of presently complicated communities, we're hardly going to solve the problem, because then the communities would be the ones causing...social problems."

In Rojas' opinion, "The police are a very important issue as are laws, laws that must be better enforced."

But the conservative daily La Prensa Libre, Costa Rica's oldest newspaper, thinks otherwise. The national consultation does not contribute to overcoming the country's problems so it should not be held, Prensa Libre claims. Security proposals should arise from the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ), the executive, and the unicameral Asamblea Legislativa (AL), read one of its latest editorials.

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