

9-1-2011

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Recommended Citation

Rodriguez, George. "Costa Rica: Cops and robbers or cops-robbers?." (2011). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/9908>

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Costa Rica: Cops and robbers or cops-robbers?

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Category/Department: Costa Rica

Published: Thursday, September 1, 2011

The morning that Costa Rica's President Laura Chinchilla, in downtown San José, swore in more than 300 police officers just out of the Escuela Nacional de Policía was quite hectic in the western port city of Puntarenas, on this Central American nation's Pacific coast. Shortly before dawn on Aug. 17, in almost 20 house searches, Organismo de Investigación Judicial (OIJ) agents busted a gang made up of 18 people—12 active members of the Fuerza Pública (Costa Rica's police) and six former police and civilians.

"La banda de los policías," as some began calling the group, operated in Puntarenas, some 115 km west of San José, and surrounding areas. Their advantage was their access to police infrastructure and resources, including uniforms, weapons, and communications equipment.

Nine members of the group have records covering a variety of crimes, ranging from abuse of authority and theft to kidnapping, sexual harassment, and domestic violence, according to data with the Departamento Disciplinario Legal of the Ministerio de Seguridad.

The official data shows that a policeman whose last names are Jiménez Fallas, allegedly the head of the gang, was already being investigated for cyber fraud worth some US\$200,000 against the state-owned Banco Popular. Jiménez Fallas and a fellow policeman whose last names are Ramírez Díaz had been arrested in 2005, when they crashed a car they had stolen.

Perhaps their most daring plan was to set up a police checkpoint at a specific point on a highway to steal a drug shipment—what in Costa Rican slang is called a tumbonazo (a knockdown). The drugs belonged to international traffickers and would be entering Costa Rica from the south, according to their telephone conversations, which were monitored by OIJ agents—Costa Rica's judiciary police. Local press reports were not specific as to whether the actually took place.

Besides being linked to several holdups, the gang members are being investigated regarding shots fired at the house of a police radio operator after she supposedly reported them for pushing drugs.

Widespread corruption

But this is not the only case of corruption in Fuerza Pública ranks. Earlier this year, in several house searches carried out on Feb. 1 in San José—the Costa Rican capital—and the central city of Heredia, some 11 km to the northwest, Policía de Control de Drogas (PCD) agents arrested 12 police and one civilian linked to drug trafficking.

Just eight days after the Puntarenas bust this month, a Policía de Tránsito (PT) officer was arrested on suspicion that he had solicited bribes from drivers at checkpoints for alcohol tests. For this, he used a rigged device that showed high alcohol readings as a means for the traffic cop to ask for a —a bribe or payoff—in exchange for not writing a ticket.

He was taped in action by highway surveillance cameras on the western outskirts of San José, and the evidence was handed over to OIJ, which managed to get in touch with the driver who paid. The morning of Aug. 25, the officer was arrested on charges of corruption.

The day of the arrest, Channel 7 reported that, using the rigged device, the officer would "negotiate" an amount ranging from 10,000 to 50,000 colones (between \$20 and \$100) for not writing the ticket for alleged drunken driving. "Traffic officers who spoke off the record said there are several more cases of other police allegedly acting the same way," the report added.

PT chief César Quirós told reporters at the scene of the arrest that, "regrettably, there's been one more corruption case, something we're trying to fight against. Perhaps it's important to underline that most officers are taking part in the struggle and that they're reporting corruption within their ranks."

Just three days after this, fellow officers arrested a PCD agent on suspicion that he had stolen a credit card during a house search almost three months before.

The influential Costa Rican newspaper quoted local authorities as saying the anti-drug officer took part in the house search in the San Ramón sector of the central city of Alajuela, some 21 km northwest of San José.

"According to the authorities, the policeman...took part in this anti-drug operation on June 9 and managed to take the card with him, which was inside the house," added the paper which is sold nationwide. "Apparently, the officer withdrew 300,000 colones (US\$600) the day of the theft, in San Ramón. He later allegedly made three more withdrawals of more than 500,000 colones (US\$1,000) each, in Alajuela. Authorities said Hidalgo [the suspect] was taped by security cameras in several automatic cashiers [ATMs]."

As the pre-dawn crackdown was in progress the morning of Aug. 18, Vice Minister of Security Walter Navarro, a former Fuerza Pública chief, told reporters that the dirty cops had been the subject of "an investigation, and we were in the process of monitoring these officers' behavior other than what's normal. This is yet another step in the powerful message, which is that any Fuerza Pública officer crossing the line and changing sides will end up where they deserve, and that's a... cell."

New officers warned that force has "zero tolerance"

A few hours later that morning, during the graduation ceremony presided by President Chinchilla, government and security officials warned against police corruption and underlined the official "zero-tolerance" policy.

Minister of Security Mario Zamora announced, regarding the Puntarenas operation, that, "just as today we graduate and welcome 357 new officers of the Fuerza Pública, also today the house is being cleaned. We are going to continue in this line [of action], we are going to be strong in carrying out the presidential order of zero tolerance to corruption."

"And we must be the first to enforce it and obey it. Police work, on the street, is disciplined work," Zamora told the graduates. "We move with very simple ethics, very basic and very clear: we must do what has to be done and must not do what must not be done. And our conscience is the first instance to determine that for us. That easy and that simple."

Along those lines, Fuerza Pública director Juan José Andrade mentioned the "apostolate of being policemen," and warned the new cops, "This uniform does not protect you from the easy life....This

uniform is not a vaccine against corruption, this uniform is not a vaccine preventing you from taking wrong roads, which is something in your work you are bound to face day and night."

"There is only one way to combat this, there is only one way to overcome this, and it is the courage of virtue," Andrade added. "I invite you to declare war on the lack of citizen safety, but...to declare war on corruption as well. We shall only take steps forward against it. Never shall we, in uniform, take a step back when it comes to reporting" acts of corruption within the Fuerza Pública.

The following day, Andrade arrived in Puntarenas at the head of 30 police officers assigned to the port city as replacements for the arrested cops.

Puntarenenses expressed hope that the newcomers turn out to be better than the lot they were replacing. "I hope they're better than the ones they took away," said one. "Whether five or ten, they have to be like what one thinks—that they give this country safety," said another.

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