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As Country Drifts from Peaceful Image, Costa Ricans Turn to Buying Guns, but Ownership Tests Are Flawed

by George Rodríguez
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Costa Rica’s traditional image as an exceptionally peaceful, safe country in the historically violent Central American region seems to be fading away. The Switzerland of Central America as it has been branded for decades, is different in a neighborhood where internal strife between guerrillas and armies, in a Cold War scenario, has given way to increasing violence stemming from organized crime, mainly drug trafficking, which has now taken center stage (NotiCen, June 3, 2010, and Oct. 6, 2011).

But for local standards, the gap that kept it apart from the rest of the chaotic region is narrowing, and Costa Ricans are becoming concerned about the turn of security events in their country, which, as analysts put it, is increasingly looking like one more in the group.

With just more than 4.6 million people, Costa Rica shows alarming official data regarding violence and citizen safety. Crime, in general, jumped from a rate of 135 cases per 100,000 inhabitants in 1990 to 295 in 2006. More specific official data indicates the national homicide rate skyrocketed from 4.0 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2004 to 11.6 in 2009, sliding down slightly to 10.6 in 2010.

Within that context, the use of a firearm in committing homicide went from 52% of cases in 2003 to 65% in 2006, and in committing violent burglary in homes, it rose by 90% between 2006-2010, according to official figures.

Crime on the rise

In this regard, the latest yearly report for 2011 issued by Latinobarómetro—a Chile-based organization that analyzes the state of democracy in Latin America—indicates that the number of victims of crime in Costa Rica rose from 31% in 1996, when the regional study began, to 38% this year.

The country showing the highest figures is El Salvador—whose internal war lasted from 1980 through 1992, For the same period, it went from 52% to 35%, after reaching all-time highs in 1998 (69%) and in 2009-2010 (79%), according to Latinobarómetro.

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In a context they consider extreme for their country, Costa Ricans are favoring extreme solutions. A telephone poll last month by this country’s Channel 7, during one of its hour-long, evening newscasts, revealed people would approve reinstating the death penalty, and recent official data shows they are opting to arm themselves.

On executing criminals, most of the more than 9,000 people taking part in the poll supported capital punishment. In answer to the question, "Do you approve of the death penalty?" 60.3% said "yes," while 39.7% said "no."
Such figures come as a surprise in the second Latin American and first Central American nation to abolish capital punishment, a decision made 129 years ago by a military ruler. On April 26, 1882, the president, Gen. Tomás Guardia (1870-1876, 1877-1882), signed the corresponding decree, and the norm was introduced in the country’s Constitution. It was kept in the Constitution drawn up in 1948 —after a successful armed revolution that year—and has been in force since.

Venezuela was, in 1863, the first Latin American nation to abolish the extreme punishment, also through its Constitution.

Costa Ricans actually favor arming themselves to protect their families, homes, businesses, and possessions. This is reflected by recent official data according to which police officers taking part in random street searches from January through July of this year, covering more than 1 million people, confiscated more than 1,000 firearms.

Ministerio de Seguridad Pública weapons director William Hidalgo said 400 such weapons were destroyed in September, since they were of no use to the police. Of the lot, 199 were registered, while 201 were in illegal possession, and 67 of the latter had their serial number erased, according to Hidalgo.

**Tests to own firearms often a sham**

Legal possession of a firearm in Costa Rica requires taking a psychological test, which should last at least three hours. But the thoroughness of those exams has been questioned lately, after media reports gave accounts of fake exams allegedly passed, in some cases, by 90% of prospective gun owners.

The whistle was blown the morning of Oct. 25 by the influential Costa Rican newspaper La Nación when it reported on an investigation by the Costa Rican Psychologists Association. Board member Miguel Garita told an October meeting of the association’s general assembly about the inquiry, according to the morning daily.

The paper reported that, according to association standards, the test costs 33,000 colones (some US $66) and lasts at least three hours. But several people who passed it told La Nación that they paid psychologists between 15,000 colones and 35,000 colones (US$30 to US$70), and they said the exams lasted anywhere from 30 minutes to six hours—and were, in some cases, carried out standing on a sidewalk.

Garita also told the assembly that weapons and security companies usually ask the psychologist to charge less than the official 33,000 colones in exchange for group tests, according to La Nación. The board member said 660 psychologists in the country are authorized to carry out the examinations, but a group of 10 to 15 such professionals actually monopolize the evaluations, La Nación added.
"According to Psychologists Association records, from January 2008 through last September, an average of 21,651 mental-aptitude exams were taken throughout the country," the paper reported. "In the same period, a group of 10 psychologists did a yearly average of 8,195 tests. Ten people did 38% of the tests, and 553 did the other 62%.”

Outstanding in the select group of overworked psychologists is Marjorie Castro, who rounded up the highest figure: 7,039 exams from 2007 through 2011, according to the report. "She is a Ministerio de Seguridad Pública employee but does the exams in her private practice," added the paper.

Castro has been arrested, released, and is being investigated on charges of corruption.

La Nación also reported that Garita told the assembly that "such practices violate the association’s code of ethics" and that "the profession becomes ‘cheap’ and is ‘prostituted’." "The general assembly fired Garita in July because of how he expressed himself during the session of Oct. 30, 2010," it also revealed.

In its editorial of last Oct. 25, the paper said that "the psychologists association's report and the unfortunate decision to sweep its contents under the rug, by silencing its author, indisputably show how dysfunctional it [the association] is."

Security Minister Mario Zamora told NotiCen that an investigation is underway to find out "whether this is the tip of an iceberg, a network where…interests come together and people plot to offer quick paperwork, while normal people find a difficult and slow process."

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