1-12-2012

Costa Rica Starts 2012 Struggling against Security Threats, Taking Part in Regional Initiatives, and Seeking Bilateral Support

George Rodríguez

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiCen by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.
Costa Rica Starts 2012 Struggling against Security Threats, Taking Part in Regional Initiatives, and Seeking Bilateral Support

by George Rodriguez
Category/Department: Costa Rica
Published: 2012-01-12

The start of 2012 finds Costa Rica struggling against the growing threats to its diminishing security, menaces posed by organized crime, particularly drug trafficking. This Central American nation is not alone—and, comparatively, is not worse off than its neighbors in the region. Costa Rican Security Minister Mario Zamora says the state of security in Costa Rica is critical but improving, a picture shown by comparative data for the January-August period from 2005 to 2011, which show decreasing numbers for homicide, rape, and vehicle theft nationwide.

However, when it comes to homicide, despite the decreasing general figures, the specific number of killings by assassins in Costa Rica is on the rise, representing around 40% of all murders nationwide, Zamora told international media, including NotiCen, during a press conference last November. This is caused by the presence of organized crime throughout Central America, a phenomenon that has not made Costa Rica an exception, according to the government official, who said Mexican drug cartels present in this country are chiefly responsible for this.

Estimates by the Organismo de Investigación Judicial (OIJ)—the country’s judicial police—indicate that homicides in this country of some 4.3 million people reached, during the 2005-2011 period, an all-time high in 2010, with 352 cases, and went down to 317 last year.

Nevertheless, the critical—although improving—security situation in Costa Rica is reflected by alarming official figures. Numbers for crime in general terms show cases per 100,000 inhabitants more than doubling from 135 in 1990 to 295 in 2006. For homicide, the figures, also per 100,000 inhabitants, shot up from 4.0 in 2004 to 11.6 in 2009, and dropped to 10.6 in 2010.

In this regard, Latinobarómetro—a Chile-based think-tank that studies the state of Latin American democracy—pointed out in its most recent report—for last year—that victims of crime in Costa Rica rose up from 36% in 1996—the first of the organization’s reports—to 38% in 2011.

Zamora said this country carries out "a security policy which, precisely, combines different factors, including...the local, national component and the regional, global component," and, "in both of these scenarios, we're setting up fronts for police action."

Regionally, "reality...has significantly changed," and "one can perceive a greater presence of Mexican cartel groups operating not only in northern Central America...but having influence in southern Central America," a phenomenon also occurring "concretely in our country," Zamora warned. The Sinaloa cartel is the most visible of such criminal organizations in the region in general and in Costa Rica in particular, according to the minister.
Growing regional cooperation

Besides internally applying a strategy increasingly involving the 12,000 police officers on patrol duty, Costa Rica is participating in a Central American effort launched last year, aimed at obtaining funding as a bloc for security projects, and it is as active on a bilateral basis with several countries.

In the first case, the idea consists of getting major countries and multilateral organizations to cooperate by funding projects put together as a region, taking into account individual needs, to be applied locally by each Central American nation. The first meeting between both sides—the International Conference for Support to the Central American Security Strategy—took place May 21-22 in Guatemala City, and it was attended by Central American—Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama—leaders or their representatives.

The cooperation side included the European Union (EU), Canada, Chile, Israel, South Korea, the US, the Banco Centroamericano de Integración Económica (BCIE), the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), and the World Bank, the latter three as technical advisers.

As a result of the first meeting, and after being presented with general projects, the potential funders came up with an offer of US$2 billion, 75% of which was on a loan basis. The meeting was followed by regional encounters during which Central American security officials presented and fine-tuned a set of projects to be taken to their next meeting with the funders.

Regionally, "we’ve fully been a part of the work being carried out...by SICA [Sistema de la Integración Centroamericana] regarding the regional security strategy," Vice Minister of Interior Marcela Chacón told NotiCen. "At first, we had 22 projects, and we’ve established a starting eight, which are going to be funded because they drew interest from at least two cooperating partners."

Projects deal with prevention of violence, improving jail infrastructure, strengthening ministries in the justice area, a regional information platform—through which the countries in the region will be able to share security information, Chacón explained.

China, US willing to help

On the bilateral cooperation-seeking front, Costa Rica is also being active. The EU, Canada, Colombia, the US, and the People’s Republic of China are among those providing support. China is interested in funding "the infrastructure for the new national police school," while the EU has "announced its support as well, with a nonrefundable, 13 million euro [some US$16.9 million] fund," for "equipping and strengthening the police school," added Chacón.

Colombia has security officials working with Costa Rican police-school counterparts on study programs and on the new school’s institutional structure, Chacón said. Canada has also offered help for police training as well as telecommunications equipment.

Help from the US will come for the construction of a new operations center for Costa Rica’s Servicio Nacional de Guardacostas (SNG) in its headquarters on the Pacific Coast—in the port city of Caldera, some 80 km west of San José, the nation’s capital—and for training personnel in the use of US-donated fast boats, Chacón reported.

On US support to this region’s struggle against organized crime, US Ambassador to Costa Rica Anne Andrew told NotiCen last month that "the United States appreciates the threat of organized
crime and narcotrafficking throughout Central America and the threat it poses to the United States. We are mindful of the levels of violence and the corruption that comes with organized crime and narcotrafficking," an illegal activity which "obviously...has affected countries such as Guatemala and Honduras much more so than it has yet affected Costa Rica. Our goal is to work with Costa Rica, which has been a very strong partner, in order to help them invest in their public institutions, in their police, in their judiciary, in their communities, so that Costa Rica can continue to be a model in Central America and Latin America."

Costa Rica is also working closely with its immediate neighbor to the south—Panama. Both countries have established an alliance to combat organized crime—specifically drug trafficking—mainly along their common, 330 km land border, an area with high crime rates. The situation on either side of the Costa Rica-Panamá border is critical regarding operations by criminal organizations, including drug-related homicide.

Costa Rican President Laura Chinchilla and her Panamanian counterpart Ricardo Martinelli highlighted last month, during a brief visit by Martinelli to Costa Rica, the will of both countries to jointly combat drug trafficking. Costa Rica and Panama are interested in having a joint policy that will allow success in that effort, the visiting president then told NotiCen.

-- End --