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Costa Rican President Plays Active Part in Promoting Effective Action against Drug Trafficking in Central America

by George Rodriguez
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Costa Rican President Laura Chinchilla is playing an active role in promoting debate on effective action against drug trafficking in Central America. This includes dialogue on decriminalizing drugs, an initiative launched by her Guatemalan colleague, President Otto Pérez Molina, a rightist retired general, immediately after becoming his country’s new president in January (NotiCen, March 1, 2012).

Costa Rica’s first woman president favors debate not only on this issue but on alternative—and more effective—policies to military and police repression as the only—or main—response to drug trafficking, which has not only been unsuccessful so far but has increased violence in Central America, turning it into an increasingly unsafe region.

Since visiting Guatemala in January for the new president’s swearing-in, Chinchilla has met with US Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano and Guatemalan Vice President Roxana Baldetti in Costa Rica and has taken part in regional summit meetings in Honduras—with US Vice President Joe Biden—and in Guatemala—called by Pérez Molina.

President Chinchilla calls for dialogue, but with caution
Chinchilla told a Feb. 21 press conference at the Casa Presidencial that she was scheduled to hold a telephone conversation with Pérez later that day. "I’m most interested in hearing directly from him...what are...the terms of reference he sees for this debate he’s proposed and, of course, in being able to suggest some elements that might, above all, guarantee the necessary consistency, seriousness, thoroughness, so [the dialogue] won’t abort at an early stage," the president told reporters.

"When one takes on an issue as complex as that of drugs, of drug trafficking, one can’t close the debate to any of the theses put on the table," said the Costa Rican head of state, a former security as well as justice minister. "The important thing here is to take on each of those discussions, each of those debates, with utmost thoroughness, with a lot of information, trying to analyze experiences that have already taken place, to be able to compare many of those experiences with lessons learned, successful experiences, failures to try not repeat, and so on."

On Costa Rica’s stand regarding drug decriminalization, Chinchilla said, "We maintain our position that debate shouldn’t be rejected, but that it’s a debate that must be taken on with much thoroughness, and that, within the framework of debating different options, we can’t ever send a message that could cause confusion in the sense that we will, of course, keep up a very strong position to combat organized crime."

"Perhaps what’s most convenient is to move to define the terms in which we want to at least begin debating and try to seek very serious organizations that are specifically discussing [the issue,]"
Chinchilla said. "What’s convenient for Central America is to basically seek some advice from such forums that have made progress on issues such as those proposed by Guatemala for the Central American region."

Three days later, Doña Laura—as she is usually referred to in Costa Rica—briefly told journalists that Baldetti was to meet with her and that, "unavoidably, the issue of organized crime, violence, and drugs and drug trafficking in Central America will be taken on."

**US throws cold water on idea**

On Feb. 28, the eve of Baldetti’s arrival, Secretary Napolitano landed in Costa Rica as part of a whirlwind tour of Central America, met with Chinchilla and other Costa Rican authorities—including Security Minister Mario Zamora—and afterward told a press conference that the US is not into legalizing drugs.

"The United States does not believe that legalizing drugs is a way out of this problem," Napolitano said in her statements in English interpreted into Spanish. "It’s a combination of other things. It’s demand reduction, it’s good treatment and abuse-prevention techniques, it is effective law enforcement and prosecution, training of law-enforcement officers, proper equipment of law-enforcement officers, and proper punishments being administered. And all of these things have to be done together. The issue of narcotics trafficking is supply and demand."

Napolitano also said, "We want to work with the countries of the region in terms of how we deal with the large trafficking organizations that are accountable for so much associated crime here in the region. And that was the subject of some of our conversations this evening," with Chinchilla and other top government officials. Napolitano said it was "a very productive meeting."

Early the following day, Napolitano took off for Panama, the last destination of the five-nation tour she began in Mexico, with quick stopovers in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Costa Rica.

Hours later, the Guatemalan vice president, on a regional tour of her own, landed in Costa Rica, met with Chinchilla and other government officials, and stressed, at an evening press conference at the Casa Presidencial, that Central American leadership is needed in the struggle against drug trafficking. The dialogue promoted by President Pérez seeks ideas from the region’s leaders in that direction, Baldetti told journalists gathered at Costa Rican government headquarters.

Days after both visits and some two weeks before the talks in Guatemala, a summit meeting took place in Tegucigalpa, the capital of Honduras, where all Central American leaders met with Vice President Biden. The March 6 meeting to discuss the violence hitting the area was convened by Honduran President Porfirio Lobo.

Press reports out of Tegucigalpa said the region’s leaders ratified their commitment to back US efforts to combat narcotrafficking, and Biden said the US respects any decision to discuss drug decriminalization.

Nevertheless, Chinchilla pointed out the need to come up with "a joint regional agenda in the sense that it tell the world that drug trafficking is not an issue of Central Americans only." This region, between South America, the top drugs producer, and North America, the major consumer, "is trying to win a battle" in which "it is suffering casualties."
The Costa Rican president headed to the central Guatemalan city of Antigua 18 days later to attend the summit called by Pérez Molina. Chinchilla, Panamanian President Ricardo Martinelli, and their host were the only heads of state attending the meeting, since Lobo, El Salvador’s Mauricio Funes, and Nicaragua’s Daniel Ortega sent representatives.

The Costa Rican leader was critical of present regional efforts against drug trafficking and said, "Much has happened, but nothing has changed." She added, "We’ve been doing things with very little impact."

Chinchilla called on Central American governments to take part this year in the UN General Assembly to ask the international community for effective action against the illegal activity instead of mere expressions of support from major powers.

In statements published on Feb. 20 by the influential Costa Rican morning daily La Nación, the head of the Instituto sobre Alcoholismo y Farmacodependencia (IAFA) Patricia Orozco said decriminalization of drugs would, at least in the beginning, trigger consumption. Once legalized, the perception of risk in drug use would drop, and potential users would be less likely to fear trying them, she warned.

But Juan Carlos Hidalgo, a public-policies analyst with the Cato Institute, wrote in an article printed two days later by La Nación that the Guatemalan president’s proposal should be backed by the other Latin American leaders. Decriminalization would provide governments with greater control of the drug market, allowing then to tax and regulate drug production and marketing, wrote Hidalgo, adding that the money raised by taxing drugs would make it easier for governments to treat addicts.

"But the biggest advantage of decriminalization would be that it would greatly scare away criminals in the drug racket, thus lowering—if not eliminating altogether—violence, crime, and corruption associated with drug trafficking," Hidalgo pointed out.

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