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Costa Rica Cautiously Resumes Full Participation in SICA

by George Rodriguez

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The high tension preceding the latest Central American summit has subsided somewhat, as Costa Rica announced the resumption—albeit cautious—of its full participation in the region’s integration system, the Sistema de la Integración Centroamericana (SICA).

The agreements signed at the conclusion of the SICA summit meeting held June 30 in Honduras made it possible, according to the administration of Costa Rican President Luis Guillermo Solís.

A press release from the Costa Rican Foreign Affairs Ministry highlighted that SICA members had “reaffirmed that presidential directives must be effectively complied with” and not remain mere statements, and “have a universal nature for the system’s entire institutional structure.” Additionally, it noted that the closing declaration also agreed “to draw up a roadmap for actions needed to strengthen and update SICA within two months.”

In a recorded statement following the gathering, Costa Rica’s Foreign Affairs Minister Manuel González made it clear that his country had decided to return to the bloc’s political arena—from which it had temporarily withdrawn late last year.

“With renewed—but also cautious—enthusiasm, we return with an attitude to propose and to seek solutions for a system that has to be more efficient, more effective, and yield better results,” he said. “And we hope that this political expression, which has been included… in a declaration that in one way or another reflects all the effort and all the principles which we’ve fought for, results in concrete, tangible, and material topics that we, as Central Americans, may feel proud of” (NotiCen, Feb. 7, 2013).

Costa Rica had originally withdrawn from SICA’s political bodies after it condemned some of its members’ lack of will to help solve the humanitarian crisis posed by thousands of US-bound Cuban migrants who were then stranded within its borders. The Solís administration repeatedly called for a “humanitarian corridor” to be agreed upon by Central American nations and Mexico in order to provide the Cubans with safe passage to the Mexican-US border. (NotiCen, Dec. 10, 2015, and Dec. 17, 2015).

The scenario quickly turned critical as some 800 Cubans who managed to cross the Costa Rican northern border into Nicaragua were stopped by Nicaraguan police and military forces and turned back to Costa Rica, after which Nicaragua militarized its side of the boundary, closing it for US-bound irregular migrants.

The Solís administration criticized Nicaragua’s decision, arguing that all countries in the region should contribute to solving the crisis, which it said was not exclusively a Tico problem, since irregular migrants—mostly Cubans, have for years crossed Central America and Mexico on a perilous land journey to reach “the American dream” (NotiCen, March 19, 2015).

In a Nov. 19, 2015, communiqué, Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega’s Gobierno de Reconciliación y Unidad Nacional (Government of National Reconciliation and Unity) made a reference to SICA.
and to Costa Rica as a member of the regional bloc composed of Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama, with the Dominican Republic as associate member.

“Nicaragua has condemned the arrogance and high-handedness of Costa Rica, which having ignored international law and agreements we all have signed, has violated our territory, threatened and blocked international trade and cargo, and is concentrating more Cuban citizens on our southern border as a means of pressure and blackmail on our government,” it said.

Five days after the Nicaraguan press release, SICA foreign affairs ministers met in El Salvador, the country that was then presiding the regional bloc. Their counterparts from Colombia, Cuba, Ecuador, and Mexico were brought into the discussions.

Costa Rica, Nicaragua again clashed

Then came a decisive SICA summit meeting in the Salvadoran capital, on Dec. 3, convened for El Salvador to hand over the bloc’s six-month rotating presidency to Honduras. Costa Rica proposed that the immigration crisis—which was not on the agenda—be taken up in search of a regional solution.

As Solís and González explained in San José, a specific proposal to airlift the Cubans to Belize’s and Guatemala’s border with Mexico so they could move on to the US was turned down by Belize, Guatemala, and Nicaragua. “We think that if we’re going to be a part of an integration system... the least we could expect as a member is that when a problem situation occurs—like the one that has come up to us... not only to costa Rica, it [has come] to the region—the system could give a timely, adequate response,” González said. Costa Rica then said it could not continue taking part in the summit meeting, and expressed its wish to suspend its participation in the Central American integration system’s political areas.

The Costa Rican government continued to search for a solution as a new government took over in Guatemala and the stranded Cubans were eventually airlifted or taken on buses from Costa Rica to the Guatemala-Mexico border and from there to the Mexico-US border. All managed to enter US territory.

Despite the fact that the Solís administration repeatedly warned that the airlift and buses was a one-time only solution, more Cubans kept arriving, seeking the same treatment. The situation then took a turn for the worse as hundreds of US-bound persons the Costa Rican government describes as “extra-continental migrants” began arriving from Africa and Asia, some reaching the northern border and also finding the Nicaraguan side shut to them.

Just before closing his six-month tenure at the SICA pro-tempore presidency, Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández paid Solís a visit on June 21. The morning meeting in San José focused on Costa Rica and SICA, and both Solís and Hernández told reporters, without taking questions, that Costa Rica might return to full participation in the regional bloc.

Solís pointed out that the contents of the declaration to be signed by the participants in the SICA summit meeting scheduled for June 30 in the Honduran island resort of Roatán, where Honduras handed over the SICA presidency to Nicaragua, could make it happen.

“Our intention to temporarily withdraw from those discussions had to do not only with the issue of the migrants... but also with our wish that a process begin, on the one hand, for SICA’s renewal,
institutional strengthening, and institutional reform, and also for some points on its agenda to be prioritized so that it is an agenda that fulfills SICA parties’ aspirations of human development,” he said. “We believe the document… could fulfill Costa Rica’s aspirations in a satisfactory manner, in such a way that Costa Rica fully returns to SICA’s discussions as of the moment the declaration is signed.”

But Ortega saw it differently, as he explained a few hours later during a press conference in Managua with Hernández, who had altered his schedule—it initially only included Costa Rica—to meet with his Nicaraguan counterpart. Ortega told Hernández that SICA functions in the economic and trade fields, as well as in the political area, “among peoples who respect each other, such as Honduras and Nicaragua, and we respect all the other Central American brothers and sisters. The exception? Costa Rica.”

Ortega added: “Costa Rica didn’t withdraw from SICA because SICA wasn’t working well. That wasn’t the reason. It simply withdrew from SICA, accusing the Central American countries of not being supportive of Costa Rica, when Costa Rica wanted to get in [to Nicaragua] the immigrants who were arriving from Cuba, and behind them, thousands of Africans, who are still there, were also coming.”

**SICA had found itself with ’a gun to its head’**

“Who puts the gun to its head? Costa Rica. What Costa Rica says must be done, or there’s no SICA,” said Ortega. “[Solís] can’t condition his return to SICA to all of us bowing our head to Costa Rica… Nicaragua isn’t going to accept, in the presidency of SICA, Costa Rica coming and saying it isn’t joining SICA as long as what they say isn’t complied with… Costa Rica’s duty is to return to SICA.”

The following morning, Solís told a press conference that Ortega’s statements were not constructive, and affirmed that Costa Rica was not imposing anything on the other SICA members.

Nicaragua and Costa Rica are frequent visitors in conflict to the International Court of Justice (ICJ). They are still sorting out financial details regarding the case they put to the world’s top tribunal in 2010, in which the judges ruled mostly in favor of Costa Rica in 2015 ([NotiCen, Nov. 18, 2010, Jan. 20, 2011, and March 17, 2011](http://example.com)). A suit that is still pending at the ICJ refers to the definition of their Caribbean and Pacific territorial waters, with Costa Rica accusing Nicaragua of having offered Costa Rican areas for foreign oil prospecting ([NotiCen, Sept. 19, 2013](http://example.com)).

-- End --