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## Costa Rica: Farm Protests Continue

by Deborah Tyroler

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As of late July, protests by Costa Rican farmers against government agricultural policies showed no signs of diminishing. (See CAU 08/03/88 for background and report on protests beginning in early June.) Among other things, farm groups are demanding more favorable credit policies for agricultural producers, compensation for losses resulting from last year's drought, a reassessment of the government's push to replace food crops with export crops, and legalization of titles for long-time farmer "occupants" of (otherwise) idle lands. Protests began in June when rural producers and their families set up barriers on highways, principally in the Atlantic region and the southwestern region of the country. In Parritas (southwest) and in Santa Clara, Guanacaste (north of San Jose), farmers temporarily occupied local municipal buildings in an effort to pressure the government to negotiate their demands. Although negotiations took place, conclusive agreements satisfactory to the protesters have not developed. The Ministry of Agriculture insists on paying only half of the drought damage compensation requested by the farmers. Deputy Minister Osvaldo Pandolfo told reporters: "In the past, they only went and had a party with the money." Other government officials, including President Oscar Arias, made more serious charges against the farmers, accusing their leaders of receiving financing and instructions from abroad and of subscribing to a "marxist ideology." In response to such verbal attacks, Carlos Campos, leader of the Atlantic Union of Agricultural Producers (UPAGRA), said: "The government doesn't know how to handle the present agrarian crisis. The best it can do is to try to weaken the movement by attacking its leaders." Campos is suing Sergio Fernandez, chief of the Office of Investigation and Security, for slander and defamation of character. Fernandez has asserted that Campos and other dissident farmers are receiving weapons from outside the country. In July, Marcos Ramirez, leader of the Association of Pacific Dryland Producers (ASPPAS), was arrested on charges of disturbing the peace, usurpation of public properties, and kidnapping. The charges stem from the June occupation of the Santa Clara municipal building. The "kidnapping" victims were municipal employees in the building at the time of the takeover. When Arias's wife intervened at that time and arranged for negotiations to take place, producers were promised that no reprisals would occur. Ramirez was held for 10 days before being released on 30,000 colones bond after the first lady intervened once again. On July 13, 350 UPAGRA members demonstrated in front of the Ministry of Agriculture offices in San Jose. They presented three concrete proposals related to the production and pricing of corn, coffee, and ginger in response to an earlier complaint by the Ministry that the group's demands were too vague. From the Ministry, the demonstrators marched to the National Production Council offices where they held a rally with Council employees. Proposed government budget cuts would remove Central Bank support for the CNP, leaving it to its own devices to seek funding for programs affecting pricing of farm products and other goods. The cuts are part of a generalized program to privatize several government operations, as recommended by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Although farmers have often complained about CNP practices, they reportedly believe that their situation would be worse if the Council were privatized. The CNP employees union opposes the government cutbacks, since they would result in the loss of 1,000 jobs. Union leaders have stated that they would be willing to strike if necessary, adding that CNP employees and rural producers have "common interests." Central Bank employees also participated in the rally alongside CNP

employees and the farmers. Protesters marched to the Legislative Assembly where a proposal to "modernize" Costa Rica's banking system was under discussion. The Central Bank, in line with IMF and World Bank dictates, is proposing the privatization of the banking system, a step also opposed by agricultural producers. Farmers are concerned that this will have an adverse effect on loan policies and the establishment of interest rates. (Basic data from 08/02/88 report by Regional Coordination for Economic and Social Research of Central America and the Caribbean-CRIES, Managua)

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