Costa Rican President On Washington's Central America Policy

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On April 4 in Washington after meeting with President Bush, Costa Rican President Oscar Arias said he welcomed Bush’s abandonment of the Reagan administration’s policy of attempting to depose the Nicaraguan government by force, and the new US support for the regional peace plan. In an interview with the New York Times, Arias said, "This is a very happy day for me. All we got from the Reagan administration was lip service to the peace plan. Today, the new administration is telling me it wants to give diplomacy a chance, which is precisely what I asked the Reagan administration to do two years ago. What the Americans are now saying to me is: 'Our policy didn't work. Your approach was right.'" White House spokesperson Marlin Fitzwater described Arias as a very valuable ally to whom the administration looked for leadership "as we try to apply diplomatic pressure to Nicaragua to live up to its promises." In meetings and in public comments, Arias said that the Bush administration's plan to continue aid to the contras until February 1990 did not violate the Feb. 14 agreement approved by the five Central American presidents in Tesoro Beach, El Salvador. Before Arias visited Washington, his senior aides said he would have preferred that the Bush administration request money from Congress only for the demobilization, relocation and repatriation of the contras, instead of aid that would help to keep them in Honduras. Under the Feb. 14 agreement, the Central American nations will prepare a plan for "the voluntary demobilization, repatriation and relocation" of the contras living in Honduras by May 16. In March, Bush and congressional leaders established a "gentlemen's agreement" to provide the contras with $4.5 million a month for food, shelter, clothing and medical supplies up to the Nicaraguan elections in 1990. Arias said, "I don't think there are any significant differences between Tesoro Beach and the American bipartisan plan. You can't ask the contras to go back to Nicaragua if you have nothing to offer them. You have to offer them freedom, the means to integrate into political life, and economic conditions so they can make a living." Arias said that Secretary of State James Baker asked whether Costa Rica would be willing to accept the contras. The Costa Rican leader replied, "I said no, definitely no. I told him we already have 200,000 illegal refugees and immigrants living in Costa Rica." El Salvador and Guatemala have also indicated unwillingness to accept the contras. Arias asked Bush to help convince private banks and creditor governments to provide debt relief for Costa Rica. The Costa Rican foreign debt of $4.6 billion ranks as one of the highest on a per capita basis world-wide. Arias reportedly argued that Costa Rica could provide a "showcase" for Washington's new debt relief plan. The Costa Rican president asked that the $1.6 billion foreign debt held by commercial banks be reduced to its value in secondary markets, about $250 million. Bush took notes on Costa Rica's debt problem, and asked Baker to set up technical talks with Treasury Secretary Nicholas Brady. (Basic data from New York Times, 04/05/89)

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