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## **An Account Of The Verbal War Between Costa Rica & Nicaragua**

*by Deborah Tyroler*

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Electoral and media legislation have become issues triggering a virtual war of words between political leaders of Costa Rica and Nicaragua. The first salvos were launched in April when Costa Rican President Oscar Arias repeatedly criticized the Nicaraguan government for its alleged malfeasance in discussing and making into law electoral and media reforms as promised by President Daniel Ortega at the Feb. 14 summit in El Salvador. On April 19, Costa Rican Foreign Minister Rodrigo Madrigal Nieto dismissed the reforms passed by the Nicaraguan National Assembly, asserting that "Nicaragua is far from fully complying with what was promised." Sandinista Comandante Bayardo Arce responded by declaring that Nicaragua's electoral reforms constituted a "more democratic" system which "extensively surpasses Costa Rican law." After mentioning alleged Costa Rican government involvement in drug trafficking and the failure of the Arias administration to ratify creation of a Central American Parliament (a provision of the 1987 regional peace accords), Arce commented, "People in glass houses shouldn't throw stones." Shortly thereafter, Nicaraguan Interior Minister Tomas Borge added: "Arias has been allowed to attack and to insult, even to provoke the Nicaraguan government, proclaiming himself the authority on how to be democratic, when on this matter there's enough dirty laundry to wash in Costa Rica." The bickering culminated in an exchange of letters between the two presidents. In reaction to repeated criticism on his allegedly unfulfilled commitments, Ortega wrote to Arias calling for "maturity in respecting the agreements made in matters of verification, since we have agreed to ask the OAS and UN to assume this role." Later Ortega told reporters: "No one named Mr. Arias an observer, and he himself has to comply with the peace plan. There are internal situations in Costa Rica that I won't get involved in, because no one named me an observer either." Arias' reply came in a missive to Ortega on May 4. He wrote, "As a Central American citizen, I cannot silence my right to free expression. This does not mean I am acting as an observer in the sense of verification of the peace plan, a role assigned to the UN and the OAS." The FSLN's daily newspaper Barricada is carrying out its own crusade against Costa Rica with a series of articles criticizing that country's electoral laws, media censorship, and human rights abuses. On April 22, a front page headline read, "Would you prefer Costa Rican Law?" The following article analyzed the reformed Nicaraguan media laws, concluding that they were much more flexible than those of other Central American countries, "especially those of Costa Rica." On May 1, Barricada published an interview with Costa Rican opposition presidential candidate, Rafael Calderon Fournier, who delivered strong criticisms of the Arias administration. On May 3 and May 22, satirical articles titled, "The 'Democracy' of Don Oscar" and "A Herculean Task: Go to Elections in Costa Rica" criticized Costa Rican media and electoral laws, respectively. "Arias Represses Costa Rican Indians" appeared on May 12. And on May 20, an editorial questioned Costa Rican "democracy" that includes increasing human rights abuses and drug trafficking charges. In addition, on May 8, Barricada reported on the discovery of torture chambers inside Costa Rica's Organization of Judicial Police office building (OIJ similar to the US FBI). The reason for publishing the old news appearing over two months before in Costa Rican and Mexican newspapers, was to provide background for the following day's editorial

which claimed: "The discovery of a torture chamber in the best Nazi GESTAPO style inside the OIJ offices reveals the existence of something worse than a 'weak democracy' in what was formerly considered the Switzerland of Central America." The commentary concluded, "We don not know if the deterioration of Costa Rica's situation is due to excessive 'neglect' by President Arias in his domestic duties because of the tasks he has taken on to watch over 'democracy' in Nicaragua; or if his interference in the internal affairs of Nicaragua has served as a smoke screen to conceal a democracy which not long ago began to go downhill fast." Costa Rican Ambassador to Nicaragua, Farid Ayales, wrote an extensive letter to Barricada in response to its commentary on the torture chambers. Published on May 17, the letter touted Costa Rica's long history as a model democracy and President Arias' role in promoting regional peace. Ayales did not miss the opportunity to criticize the Sandinistas between the lines: "We are not, nor have we ever been guerrillas. Nor does the logic of war or conspiracy fit into our form of thinking. President Arias and the majority of his collaborators are university professors and, as such, don't use shouts, threats, and insults to argue." Barricada did not lose the opportunity to strike back by publishing an editorial response directly below Ayales' letter. The commentary rebuked Ayales for not even mentioning the charges about torture chambers to which he was supposedly responding, and went on to lambast the general state of human rights in Costa Rica. Ayales had recently taken on a major role in the diplomatic battle and is well-known to Barricada readers. On two recent occasions, he was called before the Nicaraguan Foreign Ministry on charges of "overstepping his diplomatic role" by actively trying to "unify a divided Nicaraguan opposition," which implies illegal interference in internal political affairs. (Basic data from 05/28/89 bulletin by Nicaline News Network-NNN, Managua)

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