Costa Rica's Celebration Of Democracy Centennial: Summary

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Costa Rica celebrated 100 years of political democracy by inviting presidents and prime ministers from throughout the hemisphere to attend a meeting in San Jose on Oct. 27-28. President Oscar Arias did not extend invitations to the leaders of Chile, Cuba, Haiti and Panama. Leaders from the following nations attended: Argentina, Belize, Brazil, Canada, Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guyana, Honduras, Jamaica, Nicaragua, Trinidad and Tobago, United States, Uruguay and Venezuela. Mexican President Carlos Salinas de Gortari and Guatemalan counterpart Vinicio Cerezo were among invited presidents who did not attend. The last regional meeting of comparable size took place in Punta del Este, Uruguay, in 1967. President Lyndon Johnson and 19 other leaders attended. The meeting produced a plan for the economic integration of the Americas and a series of development, education, trade, health and technology goals. As pointed out by the Washington Post (10/26/89), most of these objectives were not achieved. Expectations regarding the results of the Costa Rican meeting were rather minimal. In the words of Jose Miguel Corrales, legislator of Costa Rica's ruling Liberation Party, "Where's the beef? There is no beef. It's a purely social event, drink a little coffee and leave. It's nothing more than a great tourist promotion for the country."

Highlights of the occasion are briefly summarized below.

Oct. 27: Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney announced that Canada would join the Organization of American States (OAS). Canada's status would be changed from observer to full member. OAS Secretary General Joao Baena Soares told reporters Friday afternoon that Canada's request would be taken up by the organization in November. Presidents and prime ministers participated in a three-hour discussion of regional problems and issues, including Central America, the foreign debt, deforestation, the collapse of the International Coffee Organization's quota system, and the Panamanian political crisis. Arias, and the presidents of Colombia, Nicaragua, Ecuador, El Salvador and Honduras engaged in debate with Brazilian President Jose Sarney on the need to restore the ICO quota system, which collapsed in July. Brazil is the world's largest coffee producer. World market prices plummeted from $125 to $70 per 46 kg. sack (100 lbs.). The Costa Rican Foreign Trade Ministry estimates that Latin America will lose $2.7 billion a year if the current price prevails. Talks on reestablishing the quota system are scheduled for Nov. 20-21. Colombian President Virgilio Barco said his government would give up 150,000 sacks from its quota if Brazil agrees to a 500,000 sack reduction. Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega announced that his government was considering the suspension of an 18-month cease-fire with the contras on Oct. 31. (See 11/01/89 issue of the Central America Update for details of the announcement and subsequent developments.)

Oct. 28: At a press conference on Saturday morning, President Bush asserted that Panamanian Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega was a "Cuban agent." He also made disparaging comments about Nicaraguan President Ortega. During a ceremony at the National Museum, Arias dedicated the "Plaza de la Democracia," located at the site where Jose Figueres abolished the Costa Rican army 40 years ago. General secretary of the Brazilian foreign ministry, Paulo Tarso Flecha de Lima, told Notimex that several Latin American presidents, and particularly, President Sarney, were disappointed with President Bush's comments in that he offered no "signal" of positive changes for Latin America's economic future. The Brazilian official said
that several regional leaders described the upbeat talk of a new relationship among "partners in
development" as simple rhetoric. Notimex cited President Sarney as saying that Latin American concerns are no longer a priority for the US because of Washington’s "sudden love affair" with Eastern Europe. Next, Notimex cited unidentified aides of several presidents who said that President Bush's response to descriptions of the region's serious problems and demands for rapid and effective solutions was extremely disappointing. The aides said that although Bush appeared to be more receptive than his predecessor, Ronald Reagan, he offered nothing but generalities. After a few platitudes, said the aides, Bush opted to tell his Latin American counterparts a joke which they apparently did not find amusing. The anecdote concerned a dog food manufacturer experiencing a decline in sales. After a market survey, the manufacturer concluded that dogs' taste, or food preferences, had changed. Notimex reported that the aides said the Latin American leaders were simply incredulous. (Basic data from UPI, Noticias Argentinas, 10/27/89; AP, AFP, 10/27/89, 10/28/89; Notimex, 10/28/89; Washington Post, 10/26/89, 10/28/89)

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