

3-5-1998

Angry Response in Costa Rica to U.S. Ambassador's Land-Disputes Comment

LADB Staff

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen>

Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Angry Response in Costa Rica to U.S. Ambassador's Land-Disputes Comment." (1998).
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/8389>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiCen by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

Angry Response in Costa Rica to U.S. Ambassador's Land-Disputes Comment

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Costa Rica

Published: 1998-03-05

US relations with Costa Rica were strained in February by statements from US Ambassador Thomas Dodd concerning ongoing land disputes and the shooting death of a US rancher in southwestern Costa Rica. In November, Max Dalton, a US rancher living in Pavones, and Costa Rican campesino Alvaro Aguilar were killed in a shootout during a confrontation over Dalton's land claims (see NotiCen, 12/18/97).

Members of Dalton's family say he was murdered in a plot to appropriate his property, and they have lobbied in the US to have sanctions applied to Costa Rica. Sen. Jesse Helms (R-NC) has been active in pressuring Costa Rica as has the State Department, which issued a travel warning for the Golfito-Pavones area.

Ambassador hints at economic sanctions against Costa Rica

In February, the newly installed ambassador suddenly escalated the pressure by saying the US did not exclude possible economic sanctions against Costa Rica. In a talk before the American Chamber of Commerce in San Jose, Dodd said the US government's interest was not just in the Dalton case but also in the 10-year backlog of disputed land titles involving US citizens. He urged the Costa Rican government to develop a long-range plan to end conflicts between squatters and investors in the area.

Embassy press attache David Gilmour amplified the ambassador's remarks by suggesting the sanctions could include blocking loans from multilateral institutions such as the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and the World Bank. This was not the first mention of sanctions. Earlier, Sen. Helms wrote the IDB recommending that it hold up disbursement of a US\$70 million loan to Costa Rica. If anything, Dodd's remarks made the Costa Rican authorities less cooperative than they had been. In November, officials promised the US government a full investigation.

Vice President Rodrigo Oreamuno is heading a special commission to look into the case, and Dodd expected a report from him. But after Dodd's Chamber of Commerce talk, Oreamuno announced that the commission was only going to coordinate the investigation into the two deaths and that no report would be rendered to the US government. Dodd's comments enraged some congressional deputies and prompted the Foreign Ministry and the Comision para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos en Centroamerica (CODEHUCA) to condemn US "intervention" in the Costa Rican judiciary.

Dodd quickly minimized the importance of his sanctions statement, saying it had been taken out of context by the daily newspaper La Nacion. "I guess that, through a deliberate editorial decision, the

positive message of my speech was replaced with an exaggerated emphasis on the answer I gave to a question posed by one of your journalists," Dodd said.

At present, prosecutors are not optimistic about solving the Dalton-Aguilar case as there is no reliable witness to the shootings. However, Oreamuno announced that steps would be taken to resolve the conflicts between landowners and squatters. These include a rezoning plan and relocating some squatters to nearby land provided by the Institute of Agricultural Development.

Land titles in the area remain a tangle

While these steps may reduce the squatter population, land titles remain tangled by a complex body of law under which squatters may acquire title through occupancy. In Pavones, the problems are compounded by government indecision on land expropriation and redistribution policies, the issuance by local authorities of conflicting land-use permits, and unresolved past disputes. Along with the controversy regarding Dalton's land title, already contested by squatters and a campesino cooperative called Coopeatur, is another involving Alan Nelson, a US citizen living in Mexico. Nelson stepped forward in December to say he has title to 600 ha that once belonged to convicted drug trafficker Danny Fowlie, while Fowlie claims from prison in the US that he is still the rightful owner.

Furthermore, Nelson is battling the municipality of Golfito regarding a 1993 expropriation decree for almost all of the 600 ha with compensation of US\$700 per ha. The decree and the compensation offer have since been withdrawn, but clear title has not been established. In late December another US citizen, James Popsicchela, had a run-in with squatters during which he was attacked and his beach house burned, presumably by the squatters. Popsicchela said that he had a court order to evict the squatters, but the municipal government was ineffective in preventing violence or in evicting them. "It's all a real-estate scam," he said. "It has nothing to do with poor farmers. It has to do with poor real-estate agents."

In a similar case, US and other foreign absentee landowners of a coconut plantation in Cocotalles in eastern Costa Rica have been under attack from what they describe as organized squatter takeovers. Meanwhile, the Dalton family plans to sue municipal executive Jimmy Cubillo, alleging that he participated in a scheme to take over the Dalton's property. Cubillo issued a use permit last October to the campesino cooperative Coopeatur for the same land Dalton had claimed since 1992. [Sources: Spanish News Service EFE, 02/05/98; La Nacion (Costa Rica), 12/16/97, 02/20/98; Inter Press Service, Notimex, 02/25/98; Tico Times (Costa Rica), 12/23/97, 01/16/98, 02/28/98; The Washington Post, 03/02/98]

-- End --