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COSTA RICA: THE WHINSEC SOLUTION?

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1. (C) SUMMARY: The GOCR appears poised to release its restrictions on students attending the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC), reversing a May 2007 decision by President Oscar Arias. Minister of Public Security Fernando Berrocal and Vice Minister of the Presidency Jose Torres were both favorably impressed by their visit to WHINSEC on November 5, accompanied by the Ambassador, Emboffs and a Costa Rican reporter. Berrocal is to recommend to Arias that Costa Rican personnel be allowed to attend the full range of applicable WHINSEC courses, as part of an overall police professionalization program. Berrocal's trip, which included subsequent visits to JIATF-S and SOUTHCOM, capped a six-month Embassy-SOUTHCOM-WHINSEC effort to get GOCR security force training back on track. With WHINSEC critics and opposition politicians already

counterattacking against the Berrocal visit, we will push him to follow through with Arias, as promised. We will seek action long before Berrocal's plans (not yet made public) to depart the Ministry in early 2008. END SUMMARY.

THE PROBLEM

2. (C) This impasse began on May 16, when Arias held a "private" meeting with School of the Americas Watch (SOAW) Latin American Director Rev. Roy Bourgeois and activist Lisa Sullivan Rodriguez, who were traveling through the region to persuade governments not to send students to the "former School of the Americas," WHINSEC. Berrocal attended the meeting, as did reporters from Reuters and Notimex, who broke the story.

3. (C) Bourgeois was evidently as persuasive as Arias was uninformed. Defaulting to his Nobel Peace Laureate role and without understanding the importance of future WHINSEC courses to Costa Rican police professionalization, Arias emerged from the meeting to announce that once the three students then at WHINSEC finished their courses (two in Civil-Military Operations; one in Intelligence), the GOCR would send no one else "to the School of the Americas." From its regional headquarters in Venezuela, the SOAW declared Arias's position a major victory, adding Costa Rica to the list of countries (Venezuela, Argentina, Uruguay and Bolivia) that reportedly "refused" to send students to WHINSEC.

THE REACTION

4. (C) The surprise announcement stunned senior GOCR security officials, once they realized that WHINSEC training for specialized police and intelligence units would be cut off as well. Costa Rican students had long attended both School of the Americas (SOA) and WHINSEC. Over 160 attended SOA during Arias's first term (1986-1990), including current police chief Col. Jose Pizarro. Arias himself visited the WHINSEC campus briefly, during a speaking engagement at Columbus State University in 2002. Former police chief Col. Walter Navarro is currently an instructor at WHINSEC.

5. (C) Senior security officials pressured Berrocal to permit select Costa Rican students to attend WHINSEC courses,

"quietly," despite the President's decision. Berrocal (wisely) demurred. Given the importance of Arias's actions for SOAW, the presence of Costa Rican students would surface sooner or later. The Arias administration could ill afford the controversy, which would no doubt antagonize the political left, with the CAFTA referendum planned for later in the year.

6. (C) Pressured by persistent Embassy lobbying in June and July, Berrocal realized he had a problem. IMET- and SOUTHCOM-funded training at WHINSEC was essential to the police professionalization program he sought. That funding could not be used to send Costa Ricans to civilian police academies, and even if so, none offered the range of Spanish-language courses, nor the mix of other Latin American students, as WHINSEC. Emboffs (and the Ambassador, to FM Bruno Stagno) also stressed the wider bilateral impact of Arias's decision. In effect, the President had shut the door on the centerpiece of U.S. security assistance for Costa Rica at the very time the Ambassador, Admiral Stavridis and other senior U.S. officials were pushing for additional security resources for the GOCR.

THE SOLUTION

7. (C) Berrocal reportedly had two testy meetings with Arias to change the President's mind. Arias charged Berrocal with finding a solution, but one that would not directly undercut the President's well-known credentials on demilitarization and human rights. In July, Berrocal proposed an exchange of letters with the Ambassador, which would permit Costa Rican students to attend only counternarcotics (CN) and counterterrorism (CT) training at WHINSEC. Berrocal told Emboffs he could sell this to Arias, in light of the continued successes in joint CN activities. Emboffs worked with the Minister, at his request, to clarify the details in the exchange of letters.

8. (SBU) The Ambassador's response noted that even this arrangement would mean the loss of 13 course spaces, valued at over USD 90,000 for Costa Rican students in FY2007. The lost spaces would be in uncontroversial courses on human rights, and needed courses on medical assistance. The Ambassador's letter also highlighted the appropriateness and effectiveness of WHINSEC training for Costa Rica, and argued that any dichotomy between "acceptable" and "unacceptable"

WHINSEC courses was inappropriate and unjustifiable.

9. (SBU) The Ambassador invited Berrocal to visit WHINSEC to see for himself. The week of November 4 was the first workable time period for a WHINSEC visit, since GOCCR ministers could not travel during the July-October CAFTA referendum campaign. (NOTE: Copies of the Berrocal and Langdale letters were passed to WHA/CEN in July.) Citing Arias's determination, Berrocal held firm to the CN/CT-only formula, even after agreeing to visit Ft. Benning. WHINSEC mitigated the damage by allowing Costa Rican students to move into dedicated counter-drug or counter-terrorism classes. In the end, only three human rights instructor course spaces valued at USD 15,210 were lost to the GOCCR (and made available to other countries). That figure, of course, does not cover the many man-hours lost in the preparation and coordination to send those students to the courses.

THE TRIP

10. (SBU) On November 5, Minister Berrocal and Vice-Minister Torres, accompanied by the Ambassador, Emboffs, and a Costa Rican reporter, visited WHINSEC and met with its commander, Colonel Gilberto Perez, as well as other Institute staff. During an office call with Perez, Berrocal noted that the GOCCR had been successful in counternarcotics interdiction with nearly 55 tons of cocaine seized since the Arias administration took office in May 2006. He added, however, that Costa Rica urgently needed more police training that would "best train its public forces in the best mind of its public." He thanked Perez for the CN and CT training that WHINSEC had provided to Costa Rica, but emphasized the need to professionalize about 150 mid-level police officers.

11. (U) Perez underlined that WHINSEC was the ideal solution to Costa Rica's police training needs and said the Institute could offer, in addition to CN and CT, other courses such as, but not limited to:

- Human rights
- Medical assistance training
- Leadership training
- Instructor training
- Intelligence officer training

Berrocal appreciated the offer and requested (and received)

complete course descriptions offered by WHINSEC.

12. (U) During the formal WHINSEC briefing, which emphasized the strong emphasis the institute's curriculum had on strengthening democracy and human rights, Berrocal was singularly impressed with the role that certain NGOs, such as Human Rights Watch, had played in the development of many of WHINSEC's courses. He also acknowledged Amnesty International's positive evaluation of WHINSEC's human rights training as a model to be emulated. Following the official briefing, Berrocal toured a mock drug lab (where students learn how to identify and seize such facilities); an "Engagement Skills Trainer," a virtual-reality simulator using modified but realistic weapons, to train students to differentiate civilians from criminals or terrorists in highly stressful situations; and a medical training class.

13. (SBU) Prior to departing WHINSEC, the Costa Rican reporter interviewed both Berrocal and Torres. In the interview (and in post-visit comments to us), Berrocal said that he would make a positive recommendation to President Arias that Costa Rica should lift its restrictions on student attendance and that they should be allowed to attend all applicable WHINSEC courses. Torres echoed Berrocal's comments.

THE MEDIA

14. (U) The Costa Rican reporter has already run two very positive stories in his paper, Diario Extra, (popular daily, circulation 150,000). In the first (November 9), he quoted favorable comments by Berrocal, Torres, the Ambassador, and the WHINSEC commander. The Ambassador highlighted that the U.S. wanted to contribute and support the professionalization of Costa Rica's police forces. Colonel Perez made it clear to the press that "here there are no secrets" and emphasized the open and transparent manner in which WHINSEC trained its students. In the second article (November 12), Colonel Walter Navarro (a former director of the Costa Rican Fuerza Publica and currently an instructor at WHINSEC) emphasized the professional training that he had received and taught to other students. Navarro said in the interview that the training WHINSEC offered could help fight the growing criminal underworld problem in Costa Rica.

15. (U) The positive reports have sparked counterattacks from

WHINSEC critics and opposition political figures. On November 15, Diario Extra reported that Father Bourgeois had written President Arias to urge him not to renege on his pledge in May to end Costa Rican training at WHINSEC. The opposition PAC party, meanwhile, is reportedly planning to invite Berrocal to testify before the legislature (probably the PAC-led Counternarcotics Committee) to explain his WHINSEC visits and comments. (Berrocal is on leave in the United States. He will return to Costa Rica the week of November 26.) Additionally, the English-language Tico Times published an editorial urging President Arias to stick with his May decision not to send any more Costa Rican police to train at a military base.

COMMENT:

16. (C) Berrocal's WHINSEC trip and the initial accompanying media coverage went even better than we expected. Our thanks to all those at WHINSEC and SOUTHCOM's TCA program who helped make it possible. The minister now seems to have a clear understanding of WHINSEC's mission, and the importance of its contributions to his hoped-for police professionalization program. Berrocal, in fact, had much of this information in May, and therefore should have been prepared to deal with the unfounded SOAW allegations then, but in this case the picture gained first-hand at WHINSEC was worth far more than 1000 words. We will follow up when he returns to Costa Rica and will be following up with VM Torres in coming days. We do not want the SOAW counterattack to weaken Berrocal's resolve, or to harden the President's determination. A CT/CN-only solution is a half-measure. There is no substantive reason for the GOCR to restrict Costa Rican participation at WHINSEC. We would also like to wrap this up quickly, if possible, as Berrocal shared with us on this trip, (but has not yet made public) his plans to depart the Ministry sometime between January and May of next year.

BRENNAN

References to this document in other cables

[07SANJOSE2073 \(/plusd/cables/07SANJOSE2073.html\)](#)

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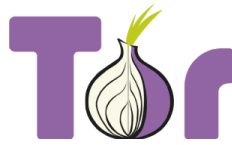
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