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Role of the Police in Costa Rica (MILITARY OR POLICE) THE REALITY

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**ABSTRACT:** Costa Rica is at the crossroads, the nation must decide whether it will expand the limited military capability of its police. The police have been given military training of a limited nature, and various types of military equipment. The country which has supplied most of the support has been the United States; with the help of a handful of interested countries. Costa Rica has been able to expand its ability to deal with threats both internal and external. The nature of the changes have been detailed in this paper, covering both the influences of foreign aid, and the reality of Costa Rica's military capabilities as they exist today, against the backdrop of Costa Rica's democratic traditions. A variety of international geopolitical forces have created a climate where Costa Rica has been forced to accept a small military capability including; coast guard forces, air wing, and equipment to expand the role of some police into ground or infantry troops. The police are going to be challenged by the force of narco dollars, and the uncertain economic future in the hemisphere and the accompanying unrest which breeds a greater probability of social conflict spilling over into peaceful Costa Rica.

**BACKGROUND:**

This paper will explore the role of the police in contemporary Costa Rica. A brief overview of the literature reveals that Costa Rica has a population of approximately 2.8 million, supplemented with an estimated 150,000-250,000 refugees from Nicaragua.(1) It's northern border is with Nicaragua, and its southern border fronts Panama. Costa Rica has two coastlines, with the Atlantic-Carribean on the east and the Pacific on the west. The country has over 800 miles of coastline; with a major river seperating the border between Nicaragua and Costa Rica. Large portions of the country in the north and the south are devoid of year round roadway systems. Costa Rica's geographical placement, parallels major transhipment routes for international drug trafficking.(2) Several sources contend that Costa Rica is vulnerable to the potential impact of large amounts of Narco dollars, and that the country's political and cultural traditions would be threatened by such an event.(3)

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"Costa Rica is the only country in Central America with a longstanding tradition of both democracy and respect for human rights".(4) It provides "free medical care to all its citizens and boasts more teachers than policemen on the public payroll".(5) Oscar Arias Sanchez the president of Costa Rica has stated that the country has 35,000 teachers at all levels. "The literacy and mortality rates are comparable to many industrialized nations, despite a per capita income of only \$1,500 per year".(6) However it owes an external debt of more than \$4 billion; which has come about through loans from commercial banks, multilateral lending institutions, and loan programs sponsored or encouraged by the government of the United States and several of its allies.(7) The country is divided into seven provinces or administrative regions; San Jose, Limon, Alajuela, Heredia, Cartago, Puntarenas, and Guanacaste. The central government is based in the capital, San Jose.

#### POLICE MISSION:

A formal police force was created during the government of Don Rafael Iglesias (1893-1902).(8) In 1949, Costa Rica adopted an article into their constitution which outlawed a standing military and charged the police with the duty to preserve public order and to protect the country. Article 12 of the constitution of 1949, specifies that the power of the police is to be under the control of the civil authorities. In time of war, or when the territory of the country is threatened the Police are to assume the role of protector.(9) "In reality, the government of Costa Rica relies upon the Rio Treaty obligations of the United States for much of its national security". (10)

#### CONTRAS/SANDINISTAS/POLICE:

Incidents involving Contras and Sandanista troops have taken place along the border and within both countries.(11) Costa Rica is in a very difficult position, because the Contras have been supported by the United States, while Costa Rica states that it does not want armed military forces operating in its country and waging war against another country thereby threatening its neutrality. However, it has a deep rooted mistrust of Nicaragua, particularly in light of the fact that the latter has attacked Costa Rica several times during this century.(12) In the same vein, the Sandinistas used Costa Rica as a staging ground from which to mount an attack on the Somoza government; thus Costa Rica has a history of professing neutrality while allowing groups to use its northern frontier areas as a staging ground. Nicaragua has the most powerful army in the region and has generated concerns among some members of the Costa Rican populace.(13)

Most recently in January of 1990, the Costa Rican Attorney General came out with a study contending that a number of individuals from the United States had been involved in both drug and arms trafficking in the country and that this activity was linked to United States government support of a covert operation.(14) The Contras pose a potential problem to the public neutrality of the Costa Rican government because they are an armed force which stages military operations against Nicaragua from bases within Costa Rica. Another aspect of Costa Rican life has changed with the fear of a Sandinista move into Costa Rica which has created a "Right Wing" response on the part of some Costa Ricans who live near the border areas. A number of armed and uniformed civilian para-military groups composed of Costa Ricans have appeared in the northern regions of Costa Rica as a direct reaction to the perception of a possible threat from Nicaragua. (15)

#### FOREIGN SUPPORT:

The combined strength of the government's civil and rural guards is estimated to be approximately 8,000-10,000.(16a. 16b.) The United States has been the primary supplier of military aid to Costa Rica. It operates a special office for joint military assistance, the Office of Defense Cooperation which is under the direct control of the United States Ambassador to Costa Rica and is part of the in-country team. The Commander-in-Chief of the Southern Command also advises the head of the Office of Defense Cooperation.(17)

Some experts on the region, suggest that Israel has provided manpower and training and equipment dating back to 1982.(18) The thrust of the "aid was to deal with terrorist acts which had arisen; to train counter-terrorists and to supply intelligence teams consisting of security and communications specialists, plus military trainers and to provide some weapons to Costa Rica including rifles, mortars, electronics and communications gear".(19) It was rumored that Israel offered to supply military equipment captured from the PLO in Lebanon, provided Costa Rica pay the transportation costs.(20) The majority of the Embassies and Consulates observed in Costa Rica were guarded by police with Israeli manufactured machine pistols.

Several authors allege that Israel cooperated with the United States, and Costa Rica in a plan to develop an infra-structure of roads, and settlements which would have a two fold purpose. First to secure a defensive position against Nicaragua, secondly to develop the more isolated regions in the north. They contend that Israel had 100 advisors working in the area of development in 1984, and that the United States Agency for International Development was directly involved in the planning for this program.(21) AID has had a significant impact upon the country, and AID personnel who had specialized military and security backgrounds were in the country in 1988.(22)(23) The construction of roads to the interior

regions, airstrips, ports, and wells, was implemented by programs which were funded by the United States government and which involved personnel from AID, and United States Military in both the southern and the northern border areas. Roadways were constructed to allow the transport of materials during time of emergency from the south to the north, this was in addition to the existing Trans-American highway.(24) Argentina, South Korea, Taiwan, Israel, Canada, Spain, Honduras, and Panama, have supplied aid to the forces of Costa Rica, either through equipment, training, or specialized expertise.(25)

#### UNITED STATES FOREIGN POLICY NOTE:

A law passed by the Congress of the United States specifically forbids the granting of military aid to foreign police agencies (1961 Foreign Assistance Act (sec. 660; P.L. 87-195).(26) However, a special exemption or amendment was made in the law for Costa Rica, in that it has a long standing democratic tradition, and does not have an army (FY86 Foreign Aid Authorization Act (P.L. 99-83/s. 960)). This amendment was designed to remove any possibility of a legal challenge to United States military assistance to Costa Rica, since Costa Rica has a police force and not a military.

#### COSTA RICAN AIR SECTION: (27)

The total personnel for the air section is estimated to number approximately 180. Little has been published relative to their mission, training, and capabilities. The country has 203 airfields, of which 196 are usable, with 59 having a permanent surface. Several of the airfields have runways of sufficient length which would allow the use of modern jet aircraft of considerable size. Some authors have speculated on the uses of an unknown number of the private airfields and have suggested that some of these have served as sites for smuggling activities for both arms and drugs; while other authors have contended that AID and the United States military have been involved in the creation of public and private landing strips in the northern and southern regions of the country.

The Air section within the forces of Costa Rica contain the following types of equipment:

#### Fixed Wing:

cessna	180	skywagon	#1
cessna	t41		#2
cessna	185	skywagon	#3
cessna	337	skymasters	#3      armed (rocket pods, m.g.)
cessna	2a-37	dragonfly	#2      attack aircraft
cessna	206g		#4
cessna	0-2a		#3
piper	pa-23-250 aztec		#1
piper	pa-23	apache	#1
piper	pa-34	seneca	#1
piper	pa-32	cherokee	#2
de haviland	dhc-3 otter		#3

helicopters:

fairchild hiller fh-1100	#1
hughes 500e3	#4 military
sikorsky s-58et	#1

A more detailed analysis of the above equipment might lead to a better appreciation of the type of aircraft that Costa Rica has today, thereby defining the role of the police in regards to their use of airpower more clearly.

COAST GUARD:(28)

The Coast Guard in Costa Rica is a relatively small force, however it has to patrol a rather large area (800 miles) given the fact that Costa Rica has two long coastlines with jurisdiction which stretches out to two hundred miles at sea. The major river which separates Costa Rica from Nicaragua requires the use of patrol boats in those areas where canals and the river are able to be navigated. Training and upkeep of equipment have been major problems for the maritime arm of the Guard. A component of recent aid has been the repair of boats and an increase in the level of training thereby decreasing the problems with equipment failure. The United States Navy small craft instructional school in Panama has been the site of training, with the goal to create a core of mechanics that can maintain the vessels. Factory representatives from the companies which supply the engines, and the boats are also involved in the training process. A major problem exists, in that personnel changes accompany presidential elections, and that the training cycles for new crews and officers have to be initiated with each change in government.

The ships which are used to patrol the waterways are built in the United States, with the larger vessels being constructed by Swiftships. According to defense department data, approximately ten million dollars has been spent on the Costa Rican Coast Guard since 1982. The Swiftship company produced a large number of small vessels during the Viet Nam conflict for use both off-shore for coastal patrol and in-shore for river and delta patrols.(29) The boats are particularly suited for low intensity conflict.

Boats: 105'	#1	crew: 14	arms: 5 fifty cal. mgs, 60mm mortar
65'	#4	crew: 9	arms: 5 fifty cal. mgs, 60mm mortar
42'	#1	crew: 4	arms: 1 fifty cal. mgs, 60mm mortar
36'	#2	crew: 2	arms: 1 fifty cal. mgs, 60mm mortar
*18'	#13	N/a	arms: N/a

\*(Boston Whaler type hull)

Total Coast Guard Patrol Boats:

21 vessels on active duty in the Costa Rican Coast Guard (30) The Costa Rican Coast Guard is very small when compared to the maritime capabilities of its neighbors Nicaragua, and Panama. The task of impeding the flow of drugs by sea is made almost impossible because of the small number of patrol boats. The protection of the national territory also has a revenue generating mission, in that a license is required

to pass through Costa Rican waters by all ships that pass within the two hundred mile area of jurisdiction. The funds go to support the maritime branch of the guard.

#### CONVENTIONAL FORCES:

The mission of the police in Costa Rica has been to protect the safety of the citizenry, and to protect and preserve the integrity of the country. However, international geopolitical events have pressured Costa Rica to accept the reality of creating a limited defense capability. In this vein, the Costa Ricans embarked on a major military buildup during the period after the Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua. It has attempted to "transform some units from the police and border guards into modern defense forces...".(31)

A major request for military assistance came from Costa Rica in May of 1984, it was recorded in a classified State Department document listing the specific type of assistance which was required by Costa Rica at that time. The document suggested that Costa Rica and the United States wanted to equip at least 5,000 members of the public forces with M-16's, 1,000,000 rounds of ammunition, 200 M-79 grenade launchers, [18] later altered to 25 k90mm recoilless rifles and ammunition, 24 81mm mortars and ammunition, 23 50caliber machine guns and ammunition plus assorted tool kits, parts, magazines, and other materials. The troops needed uniforms, flak vests, helmets, packs, and other items; almost all the items were funded plus an assortment of jeep type vehicles. The original request asked for 7 million dollars, the final amount given to Costa Rica was 9million dollars for that specific request.(32) The equipment would tend to suggest that Costa Rica has stepped into another role, regarding the functions which police carry out in their society.

Military aid, i.e., aid which has been specifically identified within the budget of the United States as foreign military assistance, peaked to Costa Rica in 1985 with 13.5 million being the largest amount received by Costa Rica.(33) At present the aid in 1990 which has been broken out of the proposed budget: (34)

- a. 1,500,000 debt forgiveness for military purchases
  - b. 250,000 for International Military Educational Training
  - c. Estimated FMS Agreements F/y 1990: 1,000,000
  - d. Estimated Value of Commercial Exp. Deliveries: 809,000
  - e. Estimated Value of Defense Articles and Services: 1,000,000
- total: \$4,559,000 (35)

#### CONCLUSIONS:

Costa Rica has changed its fundamental position regarding the role of the police. It's police force now has equipment and training (military) which allows it to fulfill a limited military role. Today, the police wear military uniforms, the style depending upon the type of mission which the police fulfill. The titles and command structure within the police reflect military tradition, plus the training given to the

police by the United States has been largely military in nature. The small number of police who are trained in conventional military procedures as infantry and who are adequately prepared both with equipment and advanced combat skills to fight against an outside conventional force (aggressor) suggests that Costa Rica has an extremely limited self-defense capability, particularly when its 800 miles of coastline, the size of its population, and geographical position are taken into account. Its best protection still rests with international security agreements.

The police are regarded by Costa Ricans as a civilian component of government, it remains to be seen how the role of the police will evolve over the coming years. Future research should focus on an analysis of budget, plus levels of staffing which might give insight into the level of importance which Costa Rica places upon the militarization of its police and whether a civilian authority will continue to be the dominant force over the police within the government of Costa Rica. Additional areas to monitor will be the overall impact of geopolitical traits, e.g., narco/dollars, the national debt., the economic well being of the country... plus the ability of local political leaders to respond to challenges which confront Costa Rica. At present, Costa Rica has a police force with a very limited self-defense capability...one which more importantly has democratic traditions which characterize the country as a whole.

**ENDNOTES:**

**AKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The author would like to thank or acknowledge the following individuals for much of the factual information contained in this paper; United States Congresswoman Barbara Boxer and her staff...in particular Mr. Joe Cohen, The Center for Defense Information/ Admiral Gene La Roque (ret.) Director of the Center, United States Congressman Robert J. Mrazek and his staff person...Mr. Stephen Goose Legislative Assistant for Foreign and Military Affairs, United States Senator Pete Wilson, Mr. John M. Broder-Los Angeles Times Washington Bureau, the helpful officers of Operations and Planning in Costa Rica who presented the author with a small pamphlet on the police and its history together with patches from every police unit in Costa Rica. All the information contained in this paper was gathered through OPEN AND PUBLISHED SOURCES EITHER PRIVATE OR GOVERNMENTAL; several observations came from chance meetings in Costa Rica which supplied fragmentary materials relative to AID which was only understood after coming back and writing up the paper. The author was informed by defense department sources that much of the information contained in this paper was classified and not available to the public; ironically all of it was available to the public and was obtained through the sources cited in the endnotes. Professor Edelman's reader on Costa Rica was invaluable and allowed the author to obtain additional materials and insight to flesh out the paper. Lastly, I would like to thank College of Marin for granting me sabbatical leave in 1988 to conduct on-site research in Costa Rica and to fund my trip to Las Vegas to deliver this paper to the Western Society of Criminology, and in the preceding year to have been given the opportunity to deliver a paper at the Western Society of Criminology Meetings in Orange County, California on the Structure and Organization of the Costa Rican Police.

1. United States of America

Congressional Presentation for Security Assistance Programs

Fiscal Year 1990

p. 119.

1. United States of America

Congressional Presentation for Security Assistance Programs

Fiscal Year 1989

p. 116.

2. Maps of drug trafficking routes furnished by the Editor of the Bulletin of International Narcotic Matters (United States Department of State)

2. United States of America  
Congressional Research Service  
C.R.S. Report for Congress  
Author : Nina M. Serafino  
Country Background Report: Costa Rica  
August 24, 88  
p. 9

3. IBID

3. Western Society of Criminology Meetings  
Spring 89 Orange County, California  
Structure of the Costa Rican Police  
Dr. Peter Kassebaum  
Paper Presentation

3. United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations  
100th Congress, Senate Subcommittee on Terrorism, Narcotics,  
and International Communications; U.S. government printing  
office  
Transcript of hearings: Part 3  
pp.8,17,53, 263-265, 268-270

4. OP CIT (Cong. Presentation Security Assistance 1990)  
p.119

4. Costa Rica: What a Difference a Country without an Army  
Troubles next door  
Ander Landaburu  
V.35 World Press Review April 88  
p.17

5. OP CIT (Cong. Presentation Security Assistance 1990)  
p.119

6. OP CIT (CRS Report, Serafino)  
p.1

6. OP CIT (Cong. Presentation Security Assistance 1990)  
p.119

7. OP CIT (CRS Report, Serafino)  
pp. 3,4,5

7. Photocopy of Budget Expenditures  
U.S. Overseas Loans and Grants and Assistance from  
International Organizations, Obligations, and Loan  
Authorizations.  
July 1,45-Sept.30-88  
Costa Rica  
p.45

8. Fuerza Publica

Ministry of Public Security Publication

Plans and Operations

National Press 1981

Translated by the author:

9. IBID

10. OP CIT (Cong. Presentation Security Assistance 1990)

p. 119

11. United States of America

Congressional Presentation for Security Assistance Fiscal Year  
1988

p. 98

11. The Costa Rica Reader

Edited by Marc Edelman

and Joanne Kenen

published 1989

Grove, Weidenfeld Press

N.Y.

author: United States Department of Defense

Secret Memo: U.S. Response to Costa Rica's Urgent Request for  
Security Assistance

pp. 278-290

12. United States Navy

Journal: Proceeding

Annapolis, Maryland

Costa Rica's Emerging Coast Guard

Lt. Commander USCG J. Heyl

Notes prior invasion of Costa Rica by Nicaragua in 1948, and  
1955.

P. 113

13. The Costa Rica Reader

Edited by Marc Edelman

and Joanne Kenen

published 1989

Grove, Weidenfeld Press

N.Y.

author: United States Department of Defense

Secret Memo: U.S. Response to Costa Rica's Urgent Request for  
Security Assistance

pp. 278-290

14. San Francisco Bay Guardian  
San Francisco California  
Articles on Drug and Arms Trafficking  
Jan. 24, 1990  
pp. 6, 21

15. The Costa Rica Reader  
Edited by Marc Edelman  
and Joanne Kenen  
published 1989  
Grove, Weidenfeld Press  
N.Y.  
Costa Rica's Right Wing Paramilitary Groups  
Jean Hopfensperger  
pp. 313-319

16. United States of America (estimate of 8,000)  
Congressional Presentation for Security Assistance Fiscal Year  
1988  
p. 98

16. DMS Market Intelligence Report (estimate of 9,500 )  
1987 (photocopy furnished by the Center for Defense  
Information)  
South America/Australasia Edition  
Unique numbering system  
p. 2

17. Personal Correspondence  
From: Richard C. Brown Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense  
Inter-American Affairs  
Dated April 6, 89 (indexed: I-89-52079)  
To: Congresswoman Barbara Boxer  
(given to the author by Congresswoman Boxer's Office)

18. St. Martin's Press and the Institute for Palestine Studies  
N.Y., Washington D.C.  
Published 1986  
Israel and Latin America: the Military Connection  
Bishara Bahbah  
Linda Butler  
p. 157

19. IBID p.158

20. IBID p.158

21. IBID pp. 158,159

22. The Costa Rica Reader  
Edited by Marc Edelman  
and Joanne Kenen  
published 1989  
Grove, Weidenfeld Press  
N.Y.

In the War on Want, Is There a Military Front?  
James LeMoyn  
pp. 290-293

23. Author's Fieldwork Notes:

Talked with the Head of an AID unit:  
He had a prior background in the Rangers, and had just been posted after a long tour of duty with AID in El Salvador.  
(other folks of a similar character were around San Jose, Costa Rica 1988 October).

24. The Costa Rica Reader  
Edited by Marc Edelman  
and Joanne Kenen  
published 1989  
Grove, Weidenfeld Press  
N.Y.

In the War on Want, Is There a Military Front?  
James LeMoyn  
pp. 290-293

24. Author's Note: The author was introduced in a social fashion to Mr. Harry Peacock, he did not give any information about his prior or active AID status in-country. He was described as a business partner by the owner of a local hotel-apartment complex where AID had some longterm leases. Mr. Peacock was identified in Mr. LeMoyn's article as the Head of the 20 million dollar AID project which created the infrastructure of roadways, and airfields.

25. Congressional Research Report for Congress  
U.S. Assistance for Foreign Police Forces  
July 18, 89  
Alan K. Yu  
Document #: 89-419f

25. The Costa Rica Reader  
Edited by Marc Edelman  
and Joanne Kenen  
published 1989  
Grove, Weidenfeld Press  
N.Y.

In Fearful Costa Rica the Yanquis are Welcome  
Stephen Kinzer  
p.303

26. Congressional Research Report for Congress  
U.S. Assistance for Foreign Police Forces  
July 18, 89  
Alan K. Yu  
Document #: 89-419f

27. Information for the section on the Costa Rican Air Section has been drawn from different sources, therefore there is a possibility of error relative to the time period which the sources represent and the present status of the equipment.

United States Arms Exports  
Policies and Contractors  
Paul L. Ferrari  
Jefferey W. Knopf  
Raul L. Madrid  
Investor Responsibility Research Center  
pp. 340-342  
(photocopy supplied by the non-profit Center for Defense Information)

D.M.S. Market Intelligence Report  
Dated: 1987  
South America/Australasia  
Nine pages-Unique numbering system  
(photocopy provided by the Center for Defense Information)

Proceedings: Journal of the U.S. Naval Institute  
Annapolis, Maryland  
Operations Center  
2062 Generals Way  
Costa Rica's Emerging Coast Guard  
Lt. Commander J. Heyl  
April 1989  
p. 114

28. IBID Proceedings: April 89 (see entire article)

29. Riverine  
Jim Mesko  
Squadron/Signal Publications  
1985  
Carrollton, Texas  
(see section on Swift Boats) (photocopies of relevant pages provided by a Riverine Veteran, the page numbers were missing, contained numerous photos and text on the role of the riverines, their boats and mission during the conflict in Viet Nam).

Brown Water, Black Berets  
Thomas J. Cutler Lt. Commander  
United States Naval Institute, Annapolis, Maryland  
1988

p. 86 (photocopies provided by a Riverine Veteran, most of the page numbers were missing, numerous photos and text).

30. The figures were compiled from the Report in Proceedings, and the DMS market report). Several sources commented about an armed 42 foot tug, but it was probably the Swift boat and not a tug, particularly given the unique shape of the Swift configuration.

31. OP CIT D.M.S. Market Report 1987  
p. 1

32. OP CIT Costa Rican Reader  
Secret Memo U.S. State Department  
pp. 278-290

The D.M.S. Market Report of 1987, stipulated that 25 km 90 recoilless rifles had been given, plus jeep type vehicles, the others figures agreed with the Memo cited above.

33. OP CIT D.M.S. Market Report 1987  
p. 1

34. OP CIT United States of America  
1990 Congressional Presentation for Security Assistance  
Programs  
p. 121

35. The total was calculated using the budget categories and amounts supplied in the above document.