

## **Officials are bracing for 'street referendum'**

**A.M. Costa Rica**  
**June 1, 2006**

Costa Rican officials are bracing for the start of demonstrations a week from today by unions and others opposed to the free trade treaty with the United States.

The demonstrations are what union leaders are calling the referendum of the streets to stop legislative ratification of the agreement.

Rodrigo Arias, minister of the Presidencia and brother of President Óscar Arias Sánchez, said Wednesday that "the right to demonstrate is the right of all Costa Ricans. It is part of a democratic country — the right of expression."

However, he said that those who are not participating in the protests also have rights, such as the right to get a bus and get to work.

Previous demonstrations, such as those in August 2004, closed down the major highways of the country for days when truckers joined the protests.

There are indications now that support for the street referendum has declined. Proponents of the trade treaty have been airing continual commercials praising the pact. And some of the support for the August 2004 protests had nothing to do with the free trade treaty but with mandatory car inspections and certain salary adjustments for public employees.

In addition, recent disclosures of special benefits for workers in some of the large state monopolies have surprised the average citizen.

The leading figure on the side of the unions is Albino Vargas Barrantes, secretary general of the Asociación Nacional de Empleados Públicos y Privados. Vargas went so far as to say his union would not recognize Arias as the legitimate president if he were elected. Arias supports the free trade treaty.

He also is the main proponent of a referendum of the streets. This is the last recourse for those opposed to the treaty. First they hoped for a presidential victory by Ottón Solís, who opposes the measure. Then they hoped that the legislature would have a makeup that would prevent treaty ratification.

Failing those results, opponents argued for a true referendum of Costa Rican citizens.

However, the Constitution clearly gives the job of ratifying international treaties to the Asamblea Legislativa.

The plan now is to bring the country to its knees through civil disobedience.

As in August 2004, the big supporters of the demonstrations are workers at the state monopolies who felt they would lose benefits and perhaps their jobs if the company had to compete with private enterprise.

The monopolies include the Instituto Costarricense de Electricidad, the telecommunications giant and power generator, and the Instituto Nacional de Seguros, the insurance agency. Farmers who grow rice also are opposed.

Some teacher unions and workers for the Caja Costarricense de Seguro Social also oppose the pact. The Caja runs the hospitals.

Part of the problem is that no one really knows what will happen if the treaty is ratified. Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic already have signed on to the agreement.

In August 2004 many tourists were stranded in the country because the highways were blocked. Then-president Abel Pacheco used minimal force with the protesters.

Arias might be tougher.