

E-Mail on CAFTA Campaign Ignites Controversy in Legislative Assembly

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Tico Times
September 10, 2007

Two high-ranking government officials Thursday admitted they suggested to President Oscar Arias in a recently leaked e-mail that the state manipulate voters and mayors to secure their support for the Central American Free-Trade Agreement with the United States (CAFTA), which will be voted on in a national referendum Oct. 7.

The e-mail, written July 29 by Second Vice-President Kevin Casas and National Liberation Party (PLN) legislator Fernando Sánchez to Arias and his brother, Presidency Minister Rodrigo Arias, reads, “We have to make (mayors) responsible for the campaign in each canton and let them know, with severity, a very simple idea: The mayor who does not win his canton (for CAFTA) will not receive a cent from the government during the next three years.”

The document also recommended that the government “stimulate fear” among voters about the risks of not approving the U.S. trade pact – fear that jobs will be lost, that democratic institutions will be weakened and that leftist leaders like Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez will gain influence.

Casas and Sánchez admitted to drafting the e-mail, and the President confirmed he received it, according to the daily La Nación. The document was leaked to the University of Costa Rica's (UCR) weekly newspaper, which broke the story Thursday.

Citizen Action Party (PAC) faction head Elizabeth Fonseca that day called on Casas and Sánchez to resign.

“What was published by the university paper gives us the most serious warning that we have a democracy in serious danger,” she said. “We are seeing a profound disrespect for democratic institutions...for the citizenry...for the weakest sectors of the country.”

Defending himself on the legislative floor Thursday, Sánchez said, “It was a draft,” and that drafts can contain “outlandish, crazy ideas.”

“What is really serious...is how that e-mail was simply stolen, taken from the computer...We cannot trust in the most basic (right to) privacy,” he said.