

Posted on Mon, Feb. 26, 2007

Costa Ricans protest free-trade pact

The Associated Press

Tens of thousands of union members, farmers and political activists marched through Costa Rica's capital on Monday to protest a free-trade pact with the U.S. they say will be harmful to local businesses.

Costa Rica is the only one of six Latin American signatories to the Central American Free Trade Agreement, or CAFTA, that has not yet ratified the accord. Legislators are awaiting a court ruling to clear procedural issues before voting on it.

Some of the protesters who took part in Monday's march carried signs reading "The North is Invading us Again" and "Farmers equal extinct species."

Much of the opposition stems from requirements under the pact that Costa Rica open its telecommunications, services and agricultural sectors to greater competition. Employees of the state-run telecom company were a major contingent in the march.

Also Monday, the newspaper Al Dia published a poll showing that 47 percent of Costa Ricans support ratifying the accord, compared to 34 percent that are opposed. The rest had no response. The pollsters interviewed 1,215 people, and the margin of error was 3 percent.

The free trade deal has taken effect in Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and El Salvador. The Dominican Republic, a Caribbean nation, was included in the pact, but its implementation there has been delayed by the need for changes in domestic laws.

Costa Rica's Congress failed to approve the pact under former President Abel Pacheco, who had argued that lawmakers needed to pass a series of fiscal reform measures before considering it.

Current President Oscar Arias, who took office last year, is a strong supporter of the agreement.