



EFE/Matthew Cavanaugh

HAIL to the Chiefs: President Abel Pacheco (left) shakes hands with U.S. President George W. Bush (right), while President Enrique Bolaños of Nicaragua looks on. The three heads of state, along with the leaders of the other four countries that have signed the Central American Free-Trade Agreement with the United States (CAFTA), met at the White House in Washington, D.C., yesterday to discuss the pact. Bush says CAFTA's ratification is essential for improving security throughout the hemisphere.

CAFTA Supporters Turn Up Heat

President Talks Trade In U.S.

BY KATHERINE STANLEY

Tico Times Staff

As President Abel Pacheco and his counterparts from the rest of Central America and the Dominican Republic descended on Washington, D.C. this week to discuss the Central American Free-Trade Agreement with the United States (CAFTA), both U.S. and Costa Rican supporters of the agreement began increasingly vocal and costly lobbying efforts for its ratification.

Pacheco's visit included a few events not on his official agenda, distributed before the trip: an on-the-run evacuation of the Capitol Building because of an unauthorized plane in protected airspace, and a visit to the Pentagon to discuss what U.S. officials call the treaty's potential to improve security in the Western Hemisphere.

Overall, Pacheco stuck to the CAFTA message he had promised to deliver, telling U.S. leaders he will send CAFTA to the Legislative Assembly only if he's sure it will benefit all Costa Ricans.

While U.S. media described the six presidents' trip – in all, the leaders visited 10 cities for events sponsored by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and member

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Airport Renovation Debated

BY REBECCA KIMITCH

Tico Times Staff

WITH the renovation of the country's main international airport stalled for more than two years because of a contract dispute, an ambitious plan by legislators to expand two other Costa Rican airports has been met with hesitation.

Few would deny Daniel Oduber International Airport in the northwest province of Guanacaste is in need of renovation.

The airport, located in the region's capital, Liberia, has seen massive growth in the past several years – the number of passengers who use it more

than tripled from April 2003 to April 2005.

Five U.S. airlines now have regular flights into the airport. As tourism and foreign investment in the region continue to boom, no one expects airport use to decrease.

HOW and by whom that airport should be expanded, however, has yet to be determined. Many stakeholders are keeping a watchful eye on the complicated and crucial negotiations between the government and Alterra Partners, which holds a 20-year contract to renovate and operate Juan Santamaría International Airport, just outside San José. A dispute

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High Hopes For New 'Model Forest'

BY REBECCA KIMITCH

Tico Times Staff

TURRIALBA, Cartago – Despite boasting the second-most-polluted river in Costa Rica, mountainsides whose trees have given way to pesticide-heavy farms, and one of the country's most poorly funded national parks for its size, the area surrounding this Caribbean-slope town has become Central America's first "model forest."

While the title may seem misleading, coordinators of the Reventazón Model Forest clarify that the project to protect the watershed of the Reventazón River – which encompasses nearly the entire province of Cartago – has only just begun and may soon be a national showcase for conservation. While a challenge lies ahead, the region's breathtaking views and wide biodiversity give reason to believe.

THE name "model forest" is a misnomer of sorts, (Page 8)

Will Big Quake Soon Strike Nicoya?

BY ROBERT GOODIER

Tico Times Staff

THE ground undulated strongly, Evaristo Díaz said, curling and opening his fingers to show the effects of the 1950 earthquake on the Nicoya Peninsula, a quake that registered a powerful 7.7 on the Richter scale.

Díaz, 69, a retired grade-school teacher who has lived his entire life in the town of Nicoya, pointed to the dense development around the Central Park, the two- and three-story cement buildings that have replaced the wooden houses of his childhood.

"Now it would be more dangerous," he said.

For years he and his neighbors have heard scientists predicting another quake of similar magnitude – historical

patterns suggest there is a 50-year lapse between the big ones – but nobody pays attention, he said.

"They don't give it any credence," he said. "Nobody has prepared themselves."

THE expected earthquake, which scientists call a certainty, not a probability, and the Pacific peninsula's seismic activity in general have shined the international scientific community's limelight on the region.

A fault lies under the entire Nicoya Peninsula, where the Cocos tectonic plate is plowing into and under the Caribbean plate with the sluggish but irresistible consistency of geologic force. As it topples downward at a pace of roughly 88 millimeters per year, it is dragging the south-

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Scientists: Big Quake Due in North Pacific

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ern edge of the peninsula down with it.

Some coastal communities have seen their beach slowly sink until seawater is lapping at their doorsteps.

But every 50 years or so, according to scientists, the peninsula breaks free of Cocos' grip and springs upward, like a diving board. Record exists of a quake of large magnitude in the region in 1853, another in 1900 and the last in 1950.

ACCORDING to Marino Protti of the Volcanological and Seismological Observatory (OVSICORI) at the Universidad Nacional (UNA) in Heredia, north of San José, the area is in the midst of a seismic gap, a waiting period between powerful quakes.

"The very limited seismic sliding that has occurred in Nicoya since 1950, the rapid convergence of the Cocos and Caribbean plates and the size of the fault at the subduction zone suggest Nicoya's seismic gap has already reached its potential to produce an earthquake with a magnitude of near 7.5," Protti said.

OVSICORI monitors a network of four stations in Nicoya that record earth tremors, and five Global Positioning System (GPS) receptors, operated together with scientists from the University of Miami and the University of Tokyo, that continuously transmit plate movement.

GPS units are a relatively new addition to the arsenal of seismic detection technology, each linked to a cloud of 24 satellites circling the earth in distinct orbits. Through receptors anchored to any point on firm ground, the units can pinpoint the movement of the earth's plates to the millimeter.

OVSICORI plans to expand its GPS



Courtesy of OVSICORI

EARTH in motion: Scientists use this photo, taken in 2001, to show how tectonic plate movement is dragging down the southern edge of the Nicoya Peninsula, on the northern Pacific coast. At right, scientist Marino Protti explains efforts to understand seismic activity in the region.

coverage on the peninsula to 12 receptors this year, Protti said. The U.S. National Science Foundation, through grants from the University of California at Santa Cruz and the University of Miami, will pay for the new GPS units.

TIMOTHY Melbourne, of the Central Washington University in the U.S. state of Washington, a visiting Fulbright professor at UNA, is studying the fault line off the coast of Nicoya as a miniature scale model of the fault line off the northwestern U.S. coast.

"The subduction in Washington is 50 times bigger than Nicoya," he said. "When the quake strikes there, it will be a Xerox copy of Sumatra (the quake that generated last year's southeast Asian tsunamis)."

To mount GPS units along Washington's fault, however, scientists

would have to drill into the sea floor miles offshore.

"What we don't have in Washington is a Nicoya Peninsula," he said. "That makes this region very special in the world. It is right on the subduction zone, so it's easy to measure the processes. These types of peninsulas are very rare — there are only about three in the world as good as this, and this is the closest to the States."

EARTHQUAKES and resulting tsunamis have claimed about 8 million lives in the last 1,000 years, Melbourne said, about half of those in the last century. It is not that there are more or bigger earthquakes these days, rather, there are much higher concentrations of people in earthquake-prone areas.

In Nicoya, "The earthquake will hap-

pen, there's no doubt," he said.

Most of its energy will be consumed on land, which will prevent it from creating tsunamis, he said.

While citizens of the town of Nicoya say they are not prepared for such a quake, scientists are attempting to understand the forces at play to predict future quakes and, hopefully, save lives.

"Seismic prediction is difficult, but not impossible. It requires a lot of observation and registry of information that allows the fine-tuning of physical models to accelerate our understanding of the natural processes that merge in the generation of earthquakes," Protti said. "This is an historic opportunity to document an earthquake of large magnitude in Costa Rica and contribute to the development and perfection of seismic prediction."



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