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FLYING High: Kite enthusiasts flocked to Parque de la Paz in southern San José Sunday to take advantage of the sunny and breezy weather. One kite, depicting a cat's face, stood out from the rest because of its larger-than-life size – taller than most people!

Tico Times/Mónica Quesada

Girls Allegedly Exploited

Accused Pimps On Trial

BY ROBERT GOODIER
Tico Times Staff

The high-profile trial of a prostitute and taxi driver accused of renting out teenage girls to well-to-do male clients for more than a decade has implicated enough people to keep investigators busy for months after the final gavel drops.

Defendants Sinaí Monge and cab driver Cristian Solano are accused of pimping – the illegal organization of prostitutes – and illicit association for alleged sex crimes between 1992-2003.

The flurry of hints and accusations that have surfaced during the testimony of the witnesses since the trial began Feb. 8 has implicated, but not named, politicians, other public officials, soccer players, businessmen and foreigners who may have used Monge's alleged services.

DURING the trial, which is open to the public, mothers have testified that Monge rented their underage daughters to clients, which, if true, would make both the client and the pimp accountable by law. (Adult prostitution is allowed in Costa Rica.)

Child Welfare Minister Rosalía Gil, not connected to
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Small Farmers Try to Recover

BY REBECCA KIMITCH
Tico Times Staff

MORE than 1,000 indigenous organic farmers in the southern Caribbean region of Talamanca have followed all the advice of how to survive on their own.

Environmental sustainability? Check. Crop diversification? Check. Alternative markets? Check.

But when torrential rains swept through the region last month, causing their farms to be taken over by water that destroyed crops and left land covered in rocks and sand, many of the small farmers found themselves, once again, facing an uphill battle.

SINCE 1987, the members of the Talamanca Association of Small Producers (APPTA) have been learning to use doctrines of sustainable agriculture to produce a variety of organic crops for a growing niche market. The organization has grown from 73 farmers to

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San José Bike Path Planned

BY REBECCA KIMITCH
Tico Times Staff

WHEN people first hear the idea of a bike path in central San José, through some of the city's most neglected neighborhoods, along the train tracks and next to a polluted river, "realistic" may not be the first word that comes to mind.

But managers of the project are optimistic their vision can become a reality.

"This will happen, if the people want it," said Xenia Escalante, coordinator of the Río María Aguilar Biological Corridor, which is heading up the bike path project for the Municipality of San José.

Understanding that a grand vision cannot be explained, but rather shared, Escalante and other planners host bike rides along various parts of the proposed 20-kilometer route, twice a month on Sundays.

STANDING in a cow pasture, surrounded by butter-

flies and looking down to the rushing river below – or across to the Comptroller General's Office building in the distance – it is hard not to share the excitement for the possibility of a bike path cutting through this wild terrain.

Not even the funk of raw sewage cascading into the river can take away from the incredible scenery and the sense that with the right support, the bike path may be possible.

The riverside portion is possibly the most ambitious part of the plan. It runs along an unpopulated tract of land on the south side of the María Aguilar River, in southern San José, near Hatillos.

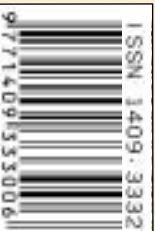
The land here belongs to the government's Institute of Housing and Urbanization (INVU). Studies have shown it is partially unsafe for construction, because it falls within the river's flood plain.

Armed with this information, planners are asking the Environment Minister to issue a decree declaring the land a National Monument, which would allow the property to be

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Trial Implicates Big-Wig Clients with Minors

(From Page 1)

the trial but distinguished as a defender of children's rights, said she hopes this case helps those children allegedly involved with Monge and that it sets a precedent for others in similar situations.

"It's an important work doing justice for the girls. There's no impunity in Costa Rica for this kind of (alleged) exploitation," Gil said.

THE first day of the trial last week saw prosecutors Ana Eugenia Salazar and Karen Valverde deliver to the three presiding judges a box of four daily planners and 91 business cards they said were taken from Monge's home.

Later, a former judicial police officer, Juan Carlos Ulate, testified that names and photos of "the highest politicians," national soccer stars and others were found in her home.

He testified an official with the Second Circuit Court was seen with Monge and a 15-year-old girl, and a wiretap revealed that Monge might have had a contact within the Judicial Investigation Police (OIJ) that warned her of imminent police raids.

ACCORDING to other witnesses, including mothers of girls who allegedly worked with Monge and minors who testi-



Tico Times/Mónica Quesada

PRESIDING over the case: The three judges listen to a witness testify Wednesday during the trial of alleged pimps Sinaí Monge and Cristian Solano.

fied in private to protect their identities, dozens of "muchachitas," girls ages 14-15, were exploited through Monge's service.

The daily La Nación detailed the testimony of one 15-year-old girl's mother, whose name was withheld to protect the identity of the minor. She said her daughter had associated with Monge since she was 12, having sex with paying clients.

Her daughter was a studious homebody, she said, until Monge invited her and her friends to "pajama parties," and she

came home with expensive perfumes, a \$500 cell phone and had a \$5,000 bank account. Her daughter told her Monge charged clients \$300 but paid her €10,000, she testified.

THIS week, the judges heard statements from police officer Erica Madrid, who said she took frequent anonymous complaints by phone from Monge's neighbors over a period of 3.5 years.

Through the calls and police patrols, police had determined the house was a brothel. Cars of all kinds, taxis and even a microbus delivered people, including Gringos and other foreigners, in front of the house. Neighbors and patrols saw men of all ages and young girls frequenting the place, Madrid said.

Two witnesses called by prosecutors, Spanish journalists from the news station El Mundo TV, didn't confirm their attendance at the trial, and may not testify. The station broadcast and later published a story on their Web site headlined "El Mundo TV Uncovers a Network of Child Sex Exploitation in

Costa Rica," in March 2001. The reports, admitted as evidence Wednesday, may have spurred Costa Rica's investigation into Monge's activities.

IN the tape, a reporter called a woman named Sinaí asking her to arrange a liaison with some young girls, and she agreed. The reporters later met the girls.

Monge was arrested Oct. 9, 2003, and has served a preventive detention sentence in prison since then.

Government prosecutors remained silent about the case this week and the spokesman for the special sex crimes investigation unit was not available for comment.

MONGE'S defense attorney, José Antonio Arguedas, said his client never recruited girls, and the charges against taxi driver Solano are misplaced because he only did his job and charged people for the ride, nothing else.

"It's a fact that Sinaí (Monge) worked her whole life as a prostitute, prostituting herself," Arguedas said. "People would ask her if she had a friend and she referred them (the girls). She never looked for them, never sought them out. The girls decided themselves if they would go. They weren't forced. There is a moral principle to consider, but Sinaí never provoked them."

He said Monge charged the girls a commission for the reference, but argued that's not illegal according to the law against exploiting prostitutes. Article 169 of Penal Code 4573 prohibits people from inducing or recruiting others into prostitution, with a penalty of 2-5 years in prison, but says nothing about making a profit off of it, which means it's legal, the defense attorney interprets.

THE trial could end next week, according to Sergio Bonilla, spokesman for the Judicial Branch.

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Other Accusations Surface in Trial

A judge was drawn into the bout of accusations against government officials, sports stars and others unleashed during the sex crimes trial for Sinaí Monge, accused of exploiting underage prostitutes.

In his testimony, former judicial police officer Juan Carlos Ulate said a wiretap revealed that Monge's son Charlie had bribed a judge at an unrelated trial. During one of the many conversations on which police eavesdropped, the official said they heard Charlie tell his defense attorney he had paid the Second Circuit judge. Later, he said, Charlie was let off the hook.

José Antonio Arguedas, a member of Monge's legal defense team, told The

Tico Times the former officer stepped out of bounds with that comment.

"The witness couldn't legally say what he said," Arguedas said. Investigators using wiretaps swear to use only the information that pertains to the crimes they are looking into, he said. He added that he has seen the trial mentioned — a robbery trial — and the three judges were women, though the witness had said Charlie paid off a male judge.

Arguedas said Charlie is not attending the trial because it's hard for him to see his mother accused of these crimes, "even if she's innocent."

State prosecutors said they are investigating every lead, including those unrelated to the trial at hand.

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