

Arias takes over presidency in Costa Rica

THE MIAMI HERALD
MAY. 08, 2006

SAN JOSE, Costa Rica - Nobel Peace Prize winner Oscar Arias returned to the Costa Rican presidency on Monday, hoping to use his skills as a mediator to unite a country sharply divided over free trade with the United States.

The 65-year-old Arias, best known for winning the Nobel Peace Prize in 1987 after helping broker an end to Central American civil wars, was sworn into office promising he will work to stabilize Costa Rica's economy through increased investment in education, job creation and a government that is committed to ethics and openness.

But as Latin American leaders and first lady Laura Bush gathered for Monday's inauguration at Costa Rica's National Stadium, about 4,000 union members, students and academics marched outside the forum to demand that Costa Rica not ratify the free trade agreement known as CAFTA. Costa Rican officials have signed the pact, but it has not been ratified in the country's Congress.

"I haven't arrived at this post to please any particular group, but to defend the interest of Costa Rican society as a whole," Arias promised in a half-hour inauguration speech after his swearing-in.

Laura Bush said she had offered Arias the support and cooperation of the United States.

"Costa Rica's democracy shows every country that if you have strong, democratic institutions, it leads to the best for the people of that country," she told reporters after the inauguration. Earlier, Arias has said that Laura Bush's presence at the ceremony was "an important gesture" by Washington.

Arias' strong support of the trade pact may have nearly cost him his bid to return to the presidency, which he held from 1986 to 1990. He argued in his campaign that the trade deal will help revitalize the country's stagnant economy.

Arias, of the National Liberation Party, defeated 51-year-old Otton Solis, of the Citizens Action Party, by little more than 18,000 of the 1.6 million votes cast. Solis opposed the trade pact, saying it would hurt Costa Rican farmers and small businesses.

Nicaragua, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and the Dominican Republic already have joined.

Despite its conflicts over trade, Costa Rica fares better than other Central American countries: It has a thriving eco-tourism industry, maintains relatively high-paying jobs and is a magnet for Salvadoran and Nicaraguan migrants.

Arias' plan to hold a mini-summit on oil strategy for the region was left in doubt when Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez canceled plans to attend the inauguration, saying he had to prepare for a summit with European leaders later this week.