

Costa Rica criticizes Taiwan as stingy

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SAN JOSE, Costa Rica --

Costa Rica's president criticized Taiwan on Thursday for being stingy with aid to its handful of allies, while other Latin American nations struggled with whether to remain loyal to the democratic island or strengthen ties with Taiwan's diplomatic rival, China.

Taiwan is lobbying to hang on to its 24 remaining diplomatic partners after Costa Rica announced Wednesday it was switching relations to China. Taiwan's allies, many of them poor countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, help bolster its claims of international legitimacy.

Self-governing Taiwan and Communist China split amid civil war in 1949 and China insists that the island remains a part of its territory.

In the battle for friends around the world, the two sides routinely offer generous grants and other inducements.

Taiwanese Foreign Minister James Huang accused China of offering Costa Rica "an astronomical figure" to ditch Taipei. He did not specify what it was.

Costa Rican President Oscar Arias acknowledged that the decision to go with Beijing was related to Costa Rica's desire to bolster its economy, and he criticized Taiwan for giving "insufficient" aid to its allies.

"I was always critical of the Taiwanese, and I can say now that I always told them ... if you want to have friends in the world, you should be more generous," he said.

"Considering the few friends they have, they don't treat them very well," Arias said of Taiwan, adding: "Without a doubt, we will get more help from China."

Alarmed Taiwanese diplomats met last month in Belize with Central American officials, hoping to shore up support after Costa Rica voted against discussion of Taiwanese membership in the World Health Organization.

Taiwan had achieved a victory on May 1 when the tiny Caribbean nation of St. Lucia announced it was shifting its relations to Taiwan.

As China's market grows, many Latin American nations worry that allying with Taiwan will cut them out of important trade with China.

"No one can dispute that having better commercial relations and investment with China is positive," Arias said. "I'm sure they will give us external aid. That's something we have discussed, and it will probably be more than Taiwan gave us, but what we really want is more trade with China."

Taiwan has tried to battle that by signing free trade agreements with Panama, Guatemala and Nicaragua. It recently added pacts with El Salvador and the Honduras and is negotiating with the Dominican Republic.

In Beijing, Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Jiang Yu said the ties with Costa Rica have "paved the way for friendly and beneficial cooperation" and she called on other countries to follow suit.

Huang, meanwhile, said he had ordered Taiwanese embassies in Latin America "to take extreme precautions against any further pressure by the Chinese communists."

Many leaders are walking a fine line between recognizing Taiwan and opening the door to China.

Panama and Honduras issued statements Thursday that they would maintain diplomatic relations with Taiwan and commercial ties to China.

The Dominican Republic has pledged to maintain relations with Taiwan through at least 2008, but it has quadrupled its trade with China in the past three years.

Paraguay is solidly behind Taiwan, which funded construction of the country's congressional building and a new, \$20 million housing project for the poor.

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In May, Nicaragua's Vice President Jaime Morales raised the possibility of cutting ties with the island when he told Huang that "we as a sovereign country choose who our friends are" and that he "doesn't deny the reality that China represents economically, commercially and geopolitically."

Analyst Andrew Yang of the Taipei-based Chinese Council of Advanced Policy Studies said the Costa Rican decision would likely create a chain reaction. "Probably Nicaragua and Panama are next and then maybe Paraguay," he said.