

CAFTA becomes law in Costa Rica

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SAN JOSE, Costa Rica --

Costa Rica's president on Wednesday signed into law a free trade agreement with its Central American neighbors, the United States and the Dominican Republic.

At the signing ceremony, President Oscar Arias called on lawmakers to pass a package of 13 complementary laws that need to be approved before March 2008 for the Central American Free Trade Agreement to take effect.

Since a thin majority of Costa Ricans backed the pact in a national referendum on Oct. 7, "the country is asking Congress to respect its choice made at the polling booths," Arias said.

Protests had been expected outside the president's residence, but only a small number of people gathered nearby holding anti-pact signs.

Costa Rica was the lone holdout among the six Latin American nations now party to the agreement. The pact has already taken effect in the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and El Salvador.

The White House fought a bruising battle to get the deal ratified by the U.S. Congress in 2005, when it passed the House of Representatives by just two votes.