
Costa Rica to Investigate US Anti-Cuba Program

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The Costa Rican government will investigate undercover U.S. programs operated from the Central American country and using its citizens in a ploy to destabilize the government in Cuba, the director of intelligence and security said Friday.

Mariano Figueres told The Associated Press that the new administration, which took office May 8, has found no records or information from their predecessors about the U.S. Agency for International Development project, which starting in 2009 sent young Venezuelans, Costa Ricans and Peruvians to Cuba in hopes of stirring opposition to the island's communist government.

Figueres said Costa Rica's only information came from an Aug. 4 Associated Press article, which said USAID and a contractor, Creative Associates International, used the cover of health and civic programs, some operating out of Costa Rica, in hopes of provoking political change in Cuba. The AP found the program continued even as U.S. officials privately told contractors to consider suspending travel to Cuba after the arrest there of contractor Alan Gross, who remains imprisoned after smuggling in sensitive technology.

"If we can confirm all this, of course we're not going to agree that our national territory be used to attack a friendly government, regardless of what ideological side you're on," Figueres said. "It's a matter of sovereignty and respect ... and we're very alarmed that they used Costa Rican citizens and put them at risk."

He said that Costa Rica has yet to ask the U.S. about the program and that any findings would be relayed through the Foreign Ministry.

The travelers worked undercover, often posing as tourists, and traveled around Cuba scouting for people they could turn into political activists.

In one case, the workers formed an HIV-prevention workshop that memos called “the perfect excuse” for the program’s political goals — a gambit that could undermine the United States’ push to improve health globally.

But the efforts in Cuba were fraught with incompetence and risk, the AP investigation found. Cuban authorities questioned who was bankrolling the travelers. The young workers nearly blew their mission to “identify potential social-change actors.” One said he got a paltry, 30-minute seminar on how to evade Cuban intelligence, and there appeared to be no safety net for the inexperienced participants if they were caught.

In all, nearly a dozen Latin Americans served in the program in Cuba, for pay as low as \$5.41 an hour.

The Obama administration has defended its use of an HIV-prevention workshop for its Cuban democracy-promotion efforts, but disputed that the project was a front for political purposes.

The White House is still facing questions about a once-secret “Cuban Twitter” project, known as ZunZuneo. That program, launched by USAID in 2009 and uncovered by the AP in April, established a primitive social media network under the noses of Cuban officials. USAID’s inspector general is investigating it.

ZunZuneo also was also devised inside Costa Rica, whose government raised concerns and asked the U.S. for an explanation of that case as well.

Costa Rica’s Frente Amplio leftist party has been the only opposition so far to respond to the latest news of the travelers’ project. It called on the government of Costa Rica to take a stronger stand against the U.S.

“Given the fact that Costa Rica has declared itself a neutral state, doing this work with Costa Ricans in Cuba undermines that,” Congressman Gerard Vargas said.
