

# Cabbies take on communism fight in Costa Rica

By **CAITLIN RANDALL**  
*Special to The Herald*

**SAN JOSE, Costa Rica** — Mario Mendez is a cab driver. Unlike most cabbies, he has been trained in warfare tactics and weapons handling at the U.S. Army's school of the Americas in Panama.

Mendez, a former major in the Costa Rican civil guard, no longer carries a gun, but he says he has helped train many of his former cabbies in the event "they have to protect Costa Rica's sovereignty."

The cab drivers' union, conservative and politically active, has spearheaded several anti-Communist protests, including an attack on the Nicaraguan embassy in San Jose, and has played a major role in Costa Rica's recent rightist drift.

The union's conservatism is due to the large number of former civil guard officers among its membership and to many drivers' moonlighting in the ultrarightist Free Costa Rica movement.

## Crush communism

"We won't permit the flower of communism to flourish in Costa Rica," explained union President Ruben Vargas. "Whenever we see it growing, we crush it."

Last May, when two Costa Rican civil guardsmen were killed in a suspected Sandinista attack along the country's northern border with Nicaragua, a crew of 100 cabbies volunteered to speed to the site and recover the bodies.

In a similar incident the year before, the union petitioned the government for M16 automatic rifles to help defend the border post of Penas Blancas, bombarded by Nicaraguan troops during a clash with anti-Sandinista rebels. The request was quickly denied.

When some 300 international peace marchers crossed the Panamanian border into Costa Rica last month, they were met by a mob of jeering cab drivers who later joined Free Costa Rica in a confrontation with the marchers.

According to Vargas, himself a former officer, at least 10 percent of the union once belonged to the Costa Rican civil guard, one of the country's two uniformed security forces that together total about

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10,000 troops. Costa Rica has no army.

### 50 a month leave

The Ministry of Public Security says that an average of 50 men a month leave the guard for higher paying jobs in the civilian world.

Civil Guard Direct Col. Lesmes Chaves blames the high attrition rate on poor salaries — about \$175 per month — and little job security.

The result, according to Chaves; is a ragtag officer corps and a good number of civilians trained in weapons handling. Chaves says many of his men go on to jobs as bodyguards, security officers, embassy guards and, because of their thorough knowledge of the city streets, cab drivers.

Many former guardsmen are also members of Free Costa Rica, which has joined forces with the cab drivers' union in anti-Communist protests. The movement's president, Bernal Urbina Pinto, says that if Costa Ricans learn to protect their democracy they will never need an army.

Less than five years ago, the civil and rural guards protected the country's 2.5 million people with World War II-vintage rifles and pistols without bullets. A series of terrorist attacks has plunged Costa Rica into the 20th Century, however.

Sneakers and street shoes have been replaced with army boots, bulletless pistols with M16 automatic rifles. Recently, about 700 civil guardsmen were trained by members of the U.S. Special Forces and supplied with M60 machine guns and mortars.

Next month, the Costa Rican national assembly is expected to vote on a bill to further professionalize the officer corps in both guards. The bill would put an end to the corps' enormous attrition rate by depoliticizing the force and hiking salaries. Critics worry that the law could institutionalize an army.