



Salvadoran President Backs Down on Drug Legalization

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Editor's Note: El Salvador's President Mauricio Funes will join President Lobo of Honduras and five other Central American presidents at tomorrow's meeting with United States Vice-President Joe Biden in Tegucigalpa to discuss security and drug trafficking issues. One of the main topics will be a proposal by Guatemala's President Otto Pérez Molina to legalize drugs.

By Juan Carlos Hidalgo

President Mauricio Funes of El Salvador has come out against the proposal of his Guatemalan counterpart to legalize drugs as a way to tackle drug trafficking in the region. Funes, a center-left politician who initially backed the Guatemalan proposal, stated his opposition [in Spanish] shortly after a visit by US Homeland Security secretary Janet Napolitano to San Salvador.

Why did Funes retreat from his original support to discussing drug legalization? Did Washington exert pressure on the Salvadoran president? It's hard to say. For once, thanks to DR-CAFTA, Central American countries no longer face trade sanctions if they upset Washington. Having a free trade agreement with the United States removed the uncertainty of depending on unilateral trade concessions from Washington that were constantly up for renewal or modification.

However, there is another unilateral program that could explain why president Funes withdrew his support to Guatemala's proposal. It's the Temporary Protected Status program (TPS), which grants certain migratory benefits to citizens of designated countries "that temporarily prevent [them] from returning safely, or in certain circumstances, where the country is unable to handle the return of its nationals adequately."

El Salvador was designated a beneficiary of TPS in March 2001 after a couple of earthquakes caused an estimated US\$1.6 billion in damages -- about 12 percent of the El Salvador's GDP. The benefits were later extended after hurricane Stan battered the country in 2005. However, seven years afterwards, the TPS has become a permanent bargaining point as Salvadoran presidents repeatedly ask Washington for more renewals. Approximately 212,000 Salvadorans benefit from the TPS.

Coincidentally, it's up to the Homeland Security Department to extend the TPS. It did so for citizens of El Salvador last January 10, but the benefits are set to expire on September 9, 2013 -- unless there's another renewal.

The TPS also benefits nationals from Honduras and Nicaragua and they are set to expire next year. Let's not expect much enthusiasm about Guatemala's proposal coming from Tegucigalpa and Managua. (3/5/12) (photo of Mauricio Funes courtesy Associated Press)

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