

By Giannina Segnini

Early in the morning of July 12, 2005, nurse Patricia Fallas sacrificed her life while guiding dozens of patients to safety as flames engulfed the Calderon Guardia Hospital. The appalling state of the building — the lack of emergency devices and signs — was among the leading reasons for the fire that caused the death of 16 patients and three nurses, who heroically struggled to save the lives of those for which they were caring.

Days after the tragedy, officials from the Costa Rican Social Security Institution (CCSS—Caja Costarricense de Seguro Social) said that there had been insufficient funds to pay for the hospital's necessary safety renovations, which several studies had labeled urgent during the past few decades. The story of this fire shows the direct effect of corruption on the life of Costa Ricans.

One year before the fire, on July 26, 2004, the CCSS had modified its budget to reallocate funds that had originally been set aside to build and improve facilities and to buy computer equipment. Instead, the US\$7.5 million was put toward the purchase of medical equipment from the Finnish consortium Instrumentarium Medko Medical. This is the same consortium that funded “commissions” to politicians and public officials involved in the purchase, which totaled US\$39.5 million.

It is now known that at least 30 percent of the equipment bought was unnecessary, according to a study paid for by the Government of Finland. It was also established that the selling consortium influenced the list of the purchased goods.

So, while the radiologists at CCSS urged the purchase of mammogram machines, the consortium included in the so-called “Finland Project” the purchase of 30 sophisticated X-ray machines for an “excessive” amount, according to radiologists. Much of the equipment was sent to clinics and hospitals where it was stored for months, either because it was unnecessary or because there was no trained staff to operate it.

In May 2007, Costa Rican courts filed aggravated corruption charges against former President Rafael Angel Calderon-Fournier (son of former President Rafael Angel Calderon-Guardia, for whom the hospital damaged by the fire was named) for masterminding, along with the equipment manufacturer's Costa Rican representatives, a plan to obtain economic benefit for allowing the purchase.

Calderon is not the only former president who has been booked on corruption charges. Ex-President Miguel Angel Rodriguez-Echeverria also was charged in 2007 with aggravated corruption for “having received gifts” from the French telephone firm Alcatel, as a reward for the approval of the purchase of 400,000 cellular phone lines worth US\$149 million.

In addition to the arrests of Rodriguez and Calderon, both belonging to the Social Christian Unity Party (PUSC— Partido de Unidad Socialcristiana), there was the forced resignation of a third former president, Jose Maria Figueres-Olsen, from his post as the top executive of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, following media reports that he had accepted “consulting fees” from a telecommunications company.

While the former presidents were in jail, humor and art served as catharsis for the populace during one of the major political crises in the history of Costa Rica.

“A deceived nation. A corrupt corporation. The chase starts,” read a sign “promoting” the film *Yo robo* (“I steal” in Spanish, a play on words based on the film *I, Robot*), on which the photos of the two former heads of state were displayed, wearing black suits and posing as the leading actors.

While that anonymous photo montage multiplied via e-mail, together with dozens of different versions and even screensavers, a young software developer became famous for the online cartoon *Corrupton*, portraying a business card presentation under the slogan “Catch ‘em all.”

Outside the virtual world, in a area known at Cuesta de Moras, just one block from the Legislative Assembly, or Congress, two theater producers worked on the last few details for the premiere of the comedy *Casa por Carcel* (House Arrest), which made fun of the excellent life enjoyed by the family of a corrupt politician who was granted house arrest.

In San Jose, a renowned painter opened an explosive exhibit in oils and mixed techniques in which he combined strong jail elements with clippings from newspapers and, of course, the faces of the former presidents of Costa Rica.

Local radio stations competed with the Internet to be the first to broadcast sarcastic parodies of popular songs, while cell phone text messages doubled with the most

recent joke about corrupt officials, such as “Why would Pope John Paul II like to die in Costa Rica? Because then he would die like Jesus Christ — amid thieves.”

Astonished Costa Ricans watched the live broadcasts as former President Miguel Rodríguez-Echeverría (1998-2002) was arrested and handcuffed on the plane that brought him back from Washington, DC, on his last day as secretary general of the Organization of American States.

One week later, throngs of citizens lined the streets to watch the “dog catcher’s” van (a van in which the police carry common criminals) carry former President Rafael Calderón-Fournier (1990-1994) to jail.

State universities organized anticorruption rallies in downtown San José and people attended en masse, carrying signs and banners. Those attending the major demonstration booed then President Abel Pacheco.

Six out of 10 citizens said they felt ashamed of the facts disclosed in late 2004, when corruption was at the top of the list of things that most worried Costa Ricans, even above such issues as crime and the economy.

Since then, the media and the General Prosecutor’s Office have become the most trusted institutions, according to citizens. The press has gained approval for disclosing the facts and the Prosecutor’s Office for its decisive action to prosecute those involved. Eight out of 10 citizens said they were willing to denounce any act of corruption in the press.

The ghost of corruption was present in voter’s minds during the February 2006 presidential elections and it was the PUSC that paid the price. The party, which had ruled Costa Rica for eight years, lost 14 congressmen, and only 2.55 percent of voters supported its presidential candidate.

But, beyond the settling of political accounts, the real bill for corruption in Costa Rica is paid when dozens of Costa Ricans have to stand in long lines to receive public health care, when surgeries are postponed because of malfunctioning equipment and when children die in the Indian region of Talamanca because there are not enough physicians to address their needs.

Today, a large photo of nurse Patricia Fallas hangs on the walls of the CCSS headquarters.

Her husband, Marvin Acuña, and daughters Hannia and María Fernanda have received all sorts of honors in her

name, and the country remembers her as a hero.

The fire, set by an imposter nurse who has since been sentenced to 25 years in prison, may not have been prevented, but what could have been avoided was the lethal effect of the flames in a building that, in a few seconds, became a death trap.

The CCSS also was found partially responsible and must pay an indemnity to the relatives of the victims because, among other reasons, the water pump did not work at the time of the fire.