

Inaugural Ceremony
Inter-American Peace Forum
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In the Introduction to his book on the Organization of American States, Jean Michel Arrighi invites us to look at a map of the Americas of a century ago and to compare it with today's, in order to show that there have been practically no changes. That contrasts, for instance, with the case of Europe, where numerous changes have taken place in the map of the region, since 1914, after 1939, and in recent decades. As Arrighi also reminds us, ushering in each of those changes were wars that took a terrible toll in terms of human lives and material losses.

Such situations have marked almost all the continents on Earth, but not ours. Although conflicts still exist between countries in our region on border issues and will remain with us for some time to come, they generally have to do with matters that, in themselves, would not suffice to bring about major changes in our political geography or trigger a real war. On the contrary, we American states can be proud of the relations we have forged among ourselves. Not only is that international system the oldest and most stable in the world; it has also managed – despite ups and downs and moments of weakness – to endow our region with conditions for peace that are practically unique in the concert of nations.

Only rarely have we resorted to arms in our conflicts. Where disputes did arise, they were short and we managed to resolve our problems by means of dialogue and reconciliation, always resorting to juridical settlements. Inter-American law has played an important part in the preservation of a climate of peace in the region. The OAS Charter, the Inter-American Democratic Charter, and the Inter-American Convention against Corruption are but a few of the best known instruments in a vast body of law whose

effective implementation has ensured peaceful coexistence and progress in the nations of the Americas.

In Article 2 of the Charter of this Organization, the member states proclaimed that one of its essential purposes is to “strengthen the peace and security of the continent” and there is no doubt that we have succeeded in that endeavor.

There are numerous ways in which we, as an Organization, have found ourselves involved in this tireless quest for peace. That experience has enabled us to strengthen our skill and capacity to lend immediate support, both in times of crisis and during periods of consolidation, through civilian missions dispatched to take actions and to work in situ.

Allow me to recall some of those missions and to begin with one addressing what is perhaps the principal brotherly concern of all the member states of our Organization: the situation in Haiti. Since 1991, when the OAS Permanent Council invoked resolution 1080 and convened an ad hoc Meeting of Ministers of Foreign Affairs to address the coup d'état perpetrated in Haiti, we have been part of an ongoing process aimed at stabilizing and strengthening the Haitian State.

Through the Special Mission in Haiti, established in 2002, the OAS has been active in the fields of human rights, the justice system, and security. In 2005, the OAS Special Mission lent support to the Provisional Electoral Council through an Electoral Technical Assistance Program in preparation for the elections. The main activities pursued by that Program were the organization of a massive voter registration campaign and the development of the technology and logistics required to produce and distribute I.D.s.

The missions to Nicaragua, between 1990 and 1997; Guatemala, between 1993 and 2003; and Suriname, between 1986 and 1992

were cases in which the OAS began by supporting peace-keeping processes and then gradually expanded them to include assistance and efforts to increase citizen participation in democratic political activities.

Likewise, in early 2004, the Government of Colombia and the OAS signed an agreement to establish a mission to support the peace process in that country by verifying cease-fire and other initiatives to end hostilities and to bring about demobilization, disarmament, and the reintegration of former combatants into society. This mission is known as “MAPP/OAS” and, with its assistance, 33,000 cases of demobilization have been verified, involving former combatants of the United Self-Defense Units of Colombia (AUC).

This mission’s mandates were framed broadly enough to allow it to work in a number of areas that contribute to peace-building in the country. Those areas of activity include, in particular, verification of the peace process; support for initiatives taken by the Government, civil society, and other bodies; verification of the delivery, custody, and destruction of weapons surrendered by the illegal armed groups; and support for local initiatives in conflict zones, by means of measures and actions aimed at reducing the violence, cementing trust, achieving reconciliation, and strengthening democracy through specific Mission projects in those communities.

In 2005, the OAS dispatched special missions to Bolivia, Ecuador, Haiti, and Nicaragua with a view to contributing to the prevention and settlement of conflicts that arose or could have arisen in those countries. On July 27, 2007, following Government of Colombia guidelines, we formed an International Forensic Commission, which played a fundamental part in determining the circumstances surrounding the deaths of 11 Colombian legislators who had been

kidnapped and held for over five years by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).

The most recent crisis experienced in the Hemisphere was the conflict between Colombia and Ecuador, which broke out in March 2008. As we all know, that triggered a break-off of diplomatic relations between the two countries and required OAS intervention in order to avoid an escalation of the conflict. With the Secretary General's visit to the scene of the incident, the establishment of a Good Offices Mission, and the work of its Special Representative for this matter, the OAS is contributing to a rapprochement between the two parties, the idea being to implement a series of confidence-building measures aimed at preventing any new tense situations and normalizing bilateral relations.

I would like to make special mention of the OAS Fund for Peace. In 2000, the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the member states of our Organization, meeting in the General Assembly held in Canada, established the Fund for Peace as a mechanism to cover costs related to the peaceful settlement of disputes.

However, this tool is more than just a material fund. It offers the parties to a dispute a series of negotiation and mediation mechanisms that are contemplated in the OAS Charter and affords them access to OAS technical expertise in conflict resolution, including its experience with diplomacy and international and inter-American law.

Since it was established, the Fund for Peace has addressed three territorial disputes and obtained successful outcomes by means of negotiation and the establishment of mutual confidence-building measures. Two of the three cases – the maritime dispute between Honduras and Nicaragua and the demarcation of the border between El Salvador and Honduras, were settled definitively. In the third – the territorial differendum between Belize and

Guatemala – major progress has been made in the negotiations toward a solution.

No listing – even for illustration purposes -- of the instruments of peace that have been created and implemented should omit to mention one exceptional achievement which, although it was not a direct product of the OAS, is binding on all the Organization's members. I am referring to the Treaty of Tlatelolco for the prohibition of nuclear weapons in Latin America and the Caribbean, signed on February 14, 1967. The fact that, to this day, it is fully in force in this part of the world set an example for nuclear disarmament schemes and has paved the way for the willing subscription by the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean of most current international disarmament agreements. That reinforces the notion that Latin America and the Caribbean are a region of peace and that the peoples of this region are bent on achieving greater integration and on resolving our differences in democracy, using the legal instruments we have forged over decades of shared history.

Nevertheless, we are aware that we need to do much more. We cannot ignore the fact that, today, threats to peace also come from other quarters, many of which are not covered by our current instruments. Over and above relations among States, the chances of achieving peaceful and democratic social coexistence are determined also by social and material progress, by the elimination of inequalities, by proper handling of the problems associated with natural disasters and pandemics, and by the containment or eradication of crime and violence.

We have no wars going on, nor do we expect them among ourselves. Nevertheless, we cannot claim to be enjoying total peace and security.

Despite being a region in peace, we have violent death rate statistics that are appalling compared to those in other parts of the world. The homicide rate in Latin America and the Caribbean is one of the highest in the world. More kidnappings take place in our region than in any other region of the world and the human and material damage wrought by crime is seriously undermining our development.

Our people no longer fear wars. What they do fear is the organized crime, terrorism, gangs, and trafficking in human beings that exact a terrible, routine toll.

We are being increasingly battered by natural disasters, caused by climatic factors beyond our control which devastate the countries in our region year after year.

That is why the inter-American system has set about developing conceptual frameworks that allow us to address our problems and contemporary threats to security and peace in our region. The search for those conceptual frameworks has taken the form of a dialogue and open political debate that has helped to refine a concept of security – and thus of peace – among our States and within them that is definitively replacing an emphasis on territorial security with another concept in which individual human beings are at the center of security concerns.

This new concept, which we have come to call “multidimensional security,” has gradually established itself in a number of agreements, but especially those arising out of the thirty-second regular session of the OAS General Assembly held in Bridgetown, Barbados, in 2002, the Special Conference on Security held in Mexico City in 2003, and the Special Summit of the Americas in Monterrey, Mexico, in 2004. At the Special Conference on Security, multidimensional security was defined in such a way as to include consideration of natural disasters or pandemics, as well

as transnational crime or terrorism, as threats to national, regional, and international security.

At the same time, I must say that, although war often strikes us as unthinkable, it is not necessarily impossible. The impossibility of war is a state we need to construct day by day through the effort and cooperation of all our countries acting in concert. The impossibility of war is forged by avoiding proliferation and increases in arms spending. It is forged through concrete measures that enable us to allocate more resources to the construction of fair societies and fewer resources to military modernization requirements. It is forged, ultimately, by devoting our energy and capacity to the creation of a shared future, not to the development of factors, situations, or attitudes that divide us and foster confrontation.

Defense is always a legitimate concern; but excessive expenditure on arms contradicts stated goals of peace and integration. It is essential to make headway with the design of new confidence-building measures and agreements to enhance transparency and arms limitation, so that spending on arms can be reduced without any party feeling that its security is thereby reduced.

The development of good relations with respect to defense, recently evidenced at the VIII Meeting of Ministers of Defense held in Banff, Canada; further development of instruments for enhancing transparency and mutual trust among our member states; and the increasing cooperation among our armed forces in Haiti and other regions, all bode well for the possibility of further disarmament.

For that, it is also crucial to avoid the transfer to our territory of conflicts arising in other parts of the world or involving super powers. If we want to live in peace, let us not allow conflicts originating in other parts of the globe to gain a foothold in our

region. Nor should we open the doors of our territory to power games and conflicts that are not of our making. We have bitter memories of experiences suffered during the Cold War, when the global conflict reached our lands and commingled explosively with domestic social and political strife. When positions in the global scenario appear to harden, I trust that we will avoid the temptation to import strategic elements of that hardening of stances. Let us make no mistake about it: we will not be participants in conflicts of power, but just pawns in confrontations that are not of our choosing.

Latin America and the Caribbean have contributed more than enough to the cause of peace to be able to demand that more powerful nations abstain from installing or expanding their strategic military presence in our region and from converting us into a stage for their disputes.

Friends:

We can do much more than we have already done to keep and strengthen peace. It is for that reason that the General Secretariat has decided to establish the Inter-American Peace Forum, which we are launching today with the participation of His Excellency, Dr. Oscar Arias Sánchez, President of Costa Rica, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize and of the Principe de Asturias International Cooperation Award. Dr. Arias Sánchez has spoken out constantly on behalf of developing countries and is a tireless defender of human development, democracy, and demilitarization.

I believe that our region still owes a debt of gratitude to President Arias for his decisive contribution to the Central American pacification process, expressed in the “Esquipulas Peace Agreement,” which is also, and rightly, known as the “Arias Peace Plan,” and for his subsequent efforts to disseminate that experience and the lessons to be learned from it. Mr. President, please once

again accept our assurances of esteem and gratitude for kindly agreeing to accompany us at this ceremony. Your presence is a great honor for us.

With the Inter-American Peace Forum, which will operate directly within the framework of the Fund for Peace, we are seeking to create an opportunity for the development of programs aimed at creating a culture of regional peace among the different segments of inter-American society. Under its umbrella we hope to conduct conferences and seminars on the subject of peace and conflict management. We also intend to prepare specialized reports, statistics, and surveys; to foster publications on these issues; and to carry out institutional training workshops and cultural and educational events. In addition, the Inter-American Peace Forum will maintain an exhaustive database of institutions and NGOs involved in promoting peace and peace research, in order to facilitate the exchange of information, experiences, and best practices.

We have numerous projects that will gradually develop out of the work of our Inter-American Forum. We seek to foster leadership; to implement a messengers-of-peace initiative with the help of distinguished leaders and well-known figures committed to that cause; and to establish an inter-American award to pay tribute to those who have contributed, disinterestedly and significantly, to the promotion and forging of peace.

We are sure that this initiative will directly strengthen the capacity of OAS member states to handle conflicts or overcome post-conflict difficulties in such a way as to achieve sustainable peace in their territories and in their domestic and foreign relations.

Above all we seek to contribute to the promotion of a culture of respect, tolerance, and harmony, so that the Americas can continue to be a region of peace. Thank you very much.