

Statement of
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Events in Suriname

Meeting of the OAS Permanent Council
February 14, 1991

In response to the Christmas Eve coup of the Surinamese military which overthrew the democratically-elected government of President Shankar, this Permanent Council responded rapidly, clearly, and firmly. Resolution 554 repudiated the military coup in Suriname; appealed for the re-establishment of the democratic institutional order within that troubled country; and requested that the Secretary General review and inform the Permanent Council on the further course of events in that member state.

This resolution was the right action, the appropriate action, the correct action for this Council. Indeed, it is this Council's responsibility to take such action anytime there is usurpation of power within this Hemisphere by any group not representing the mandate of the people.

Now there is a new development. Surinamese authorities have announced national elections will be held on May 25. That announcement, just last Saturday, begins to respond to the Council's appeal.

In announcing the election of the national assembly, whose members would elect a president and vice president, and prerequisite steps, Suriname's interim President, Johan Kraag, also stated (and I quote): "National and international organizations that express the wish to be present as observers will be granted that wish."

The United States welcomes this announcement. We deplored the Christmas eve coup in which Suriname's military forces overthrew that country's democratically elected government. At this juncture the United States believes that fair and free elections, under international observation, offer the best hope for a return to civilian rule. We shall continue to watch developments in Suriname carefully.

As we have heard today, the Secretary General is engaged on Suriname and, at the invitation of Surinamese authorities, is sending a representative to Suriname. And the OAS has been invited to send election observers to Suriname as the organization has done in Nicaragua, in Haiti, and is now doing in El Salvador.

My delegation hopes that observers from this and other international bodies, as well as those from private organizations, will be invited as early as possible. The record shows that successful observation must span the entire spectrum of election activities, and not focus simply on election day. However they are organized as to details, the elections themselves should be conducted on a level playing field, in an atmosphere of freedom, without intimidation, and with guarantees of an accurate count.

Finally, respect for individual human rights and democratic transitions are inextricably linked. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights has previously provided its presence and expertise to Suriname. As its Chairman indicated just last Monday, the IAHRC is prepared, if invited, to send a mission to Suriname. We believe the record of the IAHRC's work in Nicaragua, Haiti, and El Salvador prior to elections speaks for itself.

In sum:

My delegation welcomes the invitation to the OAS to observe the election in Suriname, and supports the Secretary General in this effort.

These elections provide a way for Surinamers to close one chapter of their history, and to join the hemisphere in democracy. The OAS, once more, is positioned to help a member country in that transition.