

A great collective challenge for us is to promote greater social equity while pursuing economic reform and sustainable growth. All of our citizens, including women, children, the disabled and our indigenous peoples, must be able to live in societies that reflect their interests, satisfy their legitimate aspirations and guarantee real participation in and access to the political, economic and social life of our countries.

Strengthening national human rights frameworks and the inter-American human rights system are the twin instruments to move this issue forward. I am particularly encouraged that indigenous issues are beginning to register with greater resonance on the hemispheric radar. Indeed, Mexico and Canada have been working to build links between our indigenous communities with a particular emphasis on developing business partnerships.

Progress in these areas must be accompanied by a commitment to strengthening democratic institutions, especially legislatures and judiciaries. Canada played a significant role in the development of concrete commitments at Santiago — focussing on access to justice, independence of the judiciary in systems of criminal justice, organized and transnational crime, children and youth, and more regular contact among justice ministers of the hemisphere.

Legislatures are also key for the effective functioning of representative democracies. At the first Summit of the Americas in Miami, our leaders tasked the OAS with encouraging exchanges of experiences among our legislatures. The OAS has followed up on this by organizing the first meeting of a network of parliamentary leaders of the Americas in Santo Domingo in November. This network is an important step in building parliamentary exchanges within the framework of the OAS — a process endorsed by foreign ministers at the OAS General Assembly in Caracas last June.

Advancing human security requires not only that we look at what issues we address but how we address them. To this end, the time has come to further redefine the interaction between governments and non-state actors, through dialogue, consultation and participation to meet emerging challenges and threats. Strengthening civil society is not only a key element in the consolidation of democracy. It promotes accountability, and contributes to the formulation of better policy by taking into account the concerns, preoccupations and expertise held by citizens.

At the regional level, Summit leaders endorsed increased dialogue between governments and civil society. At the OAS, we are collectively working to modernize the relationship of the Organization with civil society.

We need to continue the reform of our regional institutions to better respond to human security challenges. Undersecretary-General Gaviria, the OAS has been developing a new vision of its role as the hemisphere's principal political and social forum. The establishment of the Unit for the Promotion of Democracy and the expansion of the Organization's Committee on Hemispheric Security to include human security issues demonstrate the Organization's capacity to adapt its role to the challenges of the next century. The mandate given to the Organization by Summit leaders will add further momentum and shape to the OAS modernization process.

As we pursue reform at the OAS, Secretary Green, U.S. Secretary of State Albright and I have discussed how to complement these efforts through greater co-operation among the three North American countries in addressing emerging human and social challenges. We agreed on an agenda for trilateral co-operation that emphasizes our common identity as North Americans. From this flows unique challenges and opportunities to pursue closer continental co-operation across a broad range of human security issues.

For example, as North Americans we should be working more closely together on common environmental challenges, continental disaster relief operations, more people-to-people exchanges involving students, academics, indigenous peoples, government officials, and the private sector, just to mention a few. Secretary Green, Secretary Albright and myself are taking up this challenge because it can improve the daily lives of our citizens, and it builds on what we share in common. We will meet again in the coming months to review progress.