

Honoured guests, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen, It gives me great pleasure this evening to welcome Bernardo Sepulveda and Ana Sepulveda to Ottawa.

I first met Bernardo Sepulveda shortly after I took over my present job. In our many meetings since then, I have highly valued his thoughtful, compassionate and articulate views on many of the problems we are facing today. As an advocate for Mexico's own national interests and as a respected proponent of Latin American issues, he has helped to shape my focus on the region.

His vision and foresight were behind Mexico's prominent role in founding the group of eight Latin American countries as a vehicle for broad consultation among themselves. That Group emerged from the Contadora process, in which Mexico played a central role and which has been a signal force in the search for peace in Central America.

The conflict in Central America has anguished all inhabitants of this hemisphere and elsewhere.

Our hopes for peace and accommodation in that turbulent region were justifiably uplifted last August by the Arias Peace Plan. The creation of that Peace Accord was a unique achievement, born of the region and unanimously endorsed by the five Central American leaders. Its principal inspiration, Oscar Arias Sanchez, was duly recognized in Oslo last December where he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

The road to peace since then has been an arduous one, at times appearing almost impassable. Last week our hopes for peace were rekindled by the ceasefire pact concluded in the small Nicaraguan town of Sapoa. We were all heartened by that news and by the sight of Contra and Sandinista leaders together, joining in the singing of their national anthem.

But the challenge of securing a lasting peace is still daunting. Political will alone will not suffice.

The root economic disorder there has to be addressed, the fragile peace process has to be carefully nurtured.