

There was an agreement among members of all parties earlier this afternoon, Mr. Speaker, that it would be appropriate for the three parties in this House to have an opportunity to express their position on the events in Panama, and I have the honour to present a Ministerial Statement which is a little untraditional. I apologize for not having circulated advance copies to my Honourable colleagues in the House, but they will understand the circumstances that prevented that.

I thought, Mr. Speaker, I would try to do three things. First, report upon the situation in Panama as we know it at this stage; secondly, review a train of events which led to the American decision last night; and third, present to the House some observations about Panama, about the possibility of developing a stable democratic system in that country, a country in a region which, with less drama than we see in Eastern Europe, is setting a remarkable example of democracy and of economic courage. It is important that parliamentarians in this House, and countries like Canada, help Panama assume its rightful place in that invaluable process.

First the situation in Panama as we know it. The House will perhaps know that there are 131 Canadians who are registered as resident in Panama. Some of those are Canadians of dual nationality. We have been in touch or have sought to be in touch with all of them by telephone, either through our Honourary Consul in Panama City, or through the Embassy, headquartered in Costa Rica. To the best of our knowledge and our most recent consultations, all Canadians are safe; none is in danger. An official of the Embassy based in Costa Rica will be going into Panama as soon as conditions allow that to be done effectively. Fighting is falling off in Panama City, although there has unhappily been an outbreak of looting now, which is perhaps a natural consequence of the kind of disorder that can arise in those circumstances. Forces loyal to General Noriega have moved into the countryside; Noriega himself has not been captured. If there are further developments, I will try to have them brought to the attention of members who are interested, or will establish a system over the period of the recess in which either Members of Parliament or, certainly, Canadians who have family or interests in Panama, will be able to be kept informed.

As a founding member and signatory of the UN Charter, and as a recent signatory to the Charter of the Organization of American States, Canada unswervingly supports non-intervention in the affairs of a third country. In any event, a most serious event has taken place, and the Canadian government has already clearly expressed its regrets following the American