

Statement of the Inter-Church Committee on Human Rights in Latin America on the occasion of the Summit of the Americas and the parallel Popular Summit

The Inter-Church Committee on Human Rights in Latin America (ICCHRLA) -- a Canadian ecumenical coalition formed by more than 20 national Christian churches and religious communities -- will be participating in the People's Summit in Santiago, Chile (prior to the Summit of the Americas to be attended by the region's heads of state) in order to join with other organizations of civil society to call for enforceable human rights guarantees in any economic integration agreement between the countries of the Americas.

The need for such guarantees is urgent. While 1998 marks the 50th anniversary of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the core rights it enshrines are being violated throughout the Americas as a direct result of neo-liberal trade liberalization policies that are likely to be deepened by the proposed Free Trade Area of the Americas, which the Summit of the Americas seeks to advance.

ICCHRLA's church and human rights partner organizations throughout the hemisphere, have issued urgent calls about the devastating human impact of those policies, drawing attention to an alarming increase in unemployment, poverty, marginalization and social disintegration. Living conditions for the majority have been reduced to "previously unthinkable levels", state the Venezuelan Bishops. In post-war Central America, "every day there are more people who eat less", report human rights groups like the Defensoria Maya. "There is no longer a gap between rich and poor, there is a truly bottomless abyss", creating a "powder keg" that could "blow up" at any moment, states the Latin American Bishops Council. And as an ecumenical gathering of Bishops and Pastors from Latin America and the Caribbean concluded: "This exposes the deceitfulness in neoliberalism which offers and imposes the market as the magic solution to all problems, even as it oppresses and suppresses the majority."

ICCHRLA believes this is arguably the most pressing human rights issue in the Americas today; a "situation of death", as the highly respected Bishop Samuel Ruiz of San Cristobal de las Casas has called it, denouncing the high incidence of disease and premature death due to poverty-induced chronic malnutrition that continues to afflict the indigenous inhabitants of Chiapas, Mexico, despite claims the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) would bring prosperity and development to Mexico.

Our Christian conscience leads us to demand that this scandalous situation on the brink of the new millennium be rectified. ICCHRLA endorses the Belo Horizonte Declaration developed by trade union and social organizations in May 1997 and its assertion that "any trade agreement should not be an end in itself but rather a means toward combatting poverty and social exclusion and for achieving just and sustainable development".