

*Statements by Ministers*

was threats to Americans who had a right to be there and who had a right to be protected while they were there.

The Government of Canada today, in my name, issued a statement that made essentially two points. The first is that the government regrets the use of force by the U.S. in Panama, but understands and is sympathetic to the American action in the circumstances, particularly given the legitimate American concern over the escalating threats to American citizens in Panama. People have a right to be there and had a right to be protected.

Second, we made the point very clearly that intervention by force is a dangerous precedent and we note that the United States relied on force only in the last resort, only after the failure of attempts to resolve the situation in Panama peacefully.

The question is: What now? What now occurs? What now should be done? I want to mention three things that I think should be on our minds as we try to look forward. One is that we have to work and use all of the influence and standing of Canada to ensure that intervention not become a precedent. There were unique factors here and if they can justify actions that were taken early this morning by the United States, it is the uniqueness that justifies them. There is not a precedent established here that this Parliament or this country would approve in other circumstances.

I think that, Sir, is a particularly important assurance to be given to the people and to the Government of Nicaragua, where elections are imminent and where every effort must continue to make those elections free and make those elections fair.

Second, we believe it is important that we help the government that was elected in May in Panama to establish stability and democracy in that country. That was the theme, I can tell members of the House, in many of the consultations I had today by telephone with Latin leaders of the Organization of American States. They are interested in taking advantage of the opportunity that has been created now to try to sink some of the roots of stability and a democracy that will be important if Panama is to assume its place of significance in a region where those qualities have come to be more evident and more valued.

We intend to send a team of Canadian officials to Panama as soon as that would be productive to see if there are specific ways in which Canada can contribute to that process.

Third, I think there is a lesson here of the real need to strengthen the regional institutions in Latin America, particularly in Central America. It is clear that the Organization of American States, despite its efforts, did not work in Panama. They were not able to achieve the peaceful solution that they sought and that others sought.

But I think it important to note that the OAS made a serious attempt to succeed and that, Mr. Speaker, was a change in itself. It demonstrates a new resolution among members of the Organization of American States that Canada can push forward and, in our judgment, must push forward.

The point to underline, Sir, is that Central America is not anybody's backyard. Central America consists of sovereign countries, with ambitions of their own, histories of their own, qualities of their own. It is a region which is remarkable for the will that has been demonstrated by its leadership, particularly in the last two and three years, the will to work together and the will to work together against quite extraordinary odds, including the pull of their own history in that region.

• (1830)

Traditionalists have asked, why would Canada want to focus on Central America, why would we be in the Organization of American States, why would we play the active role that we are in ONUCA, the United Nations Peacekeeping and Verification Agency, that is playing a potentially critical role in the region, why would we maintain our aid and development assisted relations with the five countries involved in the Esquipulas arrangement? We do that, Sir, because Central America and Latin America as a whole are changing, changing by their own will.

Carlos Andrés Pérez, the President of Venezuela, repeated again to me this morning when I spoke to him to talk about the events in Panama, his profound belief that Canada has a crucial role to play in that region, both because of who we are and because of who we are not. The role, in his judgment, can be critical if the institutions and the instinct to reform that had been evident there are to become as effective as they can be.