

I want to report to the House upon my conversations and meetings last week in Nicaragua, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Costa Rica and, in particular, to discuss the peace process agreed unanimously by the five Central American presidents, in their August meeting in Esquipulas.

That agreement seeks to achieve "the climate of liberty that democracy ensures", and it sets forth conditions with which all five governments must comply. Two characteristics invest this agreement with unusual promise: it is unanimous and it is indigenous. It is not a prescription from outside, but a commitment made deliberately by all five presidents. It is my impression, after talking to each president, that all intend to keep the word they gave. Indeed, a strength of this agreement is that no one - no government, no guerrilla force, no outside power - will want to stand accused of making the agreement fail. It is therefore of unusual importance that, in addition to whatever other help countries like Canada might offer, we seek to create a public opinion that is informed and dispassionate about this process, so that compliance can be fairly judged and pressure for compliance fully maintained.

No peace is simple, and countries who are serious about contributing to the success of this process must begin by understanding the complexity of the conflicts and the history of Central America, and the relative frailty of the democracy the Accord seeks to promote. Just eight years ago, in 1979, Costa Rica was the only democracy in the region. The Government of Nicaragua, then, was an oppressive, almost feudal regime which invited revolution. The tradition in the region, again excepting Costa Rica, has been for crises to be resolved by force and military rule, so there are not deep roots for the democratic parties and institutions which can guarantee civil liberties and human rights as Canadians understand them. The region is still torn by extremism, of both the right and the left, and marked by poverty, injustice, exploitation. Its economy is hobbled by debt, low commodity prices, frequent inefficiency, and the spectre and reality of war, which drive growth away, and distort domestic priorities. Even nature has been cruel, and the capital cities of Managua, Guatemala and San Salvador have all been struck visibly by earthquakes. Those are the circumstances in which the five presidents seek peace.