

One major threat to the hemispheric environment is the tragic destruction of the Amazon rain forest, where so much of the oxygen which sustains the world is born.

Dangerous industrial chemicals - now outlawed in Canada - are showing up in our lakes and rivers, borne by winds and rain from Central America.

We in the industrialized northern part of this hemisphere must help others avoid the mistakes we have made, for this planet cannot sustain repeated assaults on its environment.

The pandemic of drug abuse is disfiguring societies in both North America and Latin America. It is the most destructive form of interdependence, where demand in North America is feeding production in Latin America, and vice versa. Here too, the only solution is to act together.

The awful burden of debt is particularly acute in Latin America, and poses a threat to the fledgling democracies of the hemisphere. It also threatens the entire global economic system, and therefore Canadian prosperity.

Those are problems of surpassing significance. We can't walk away from them. But what makes our active presence in Latin America so important now, is the fact that those problems are matched by a new opportunity in the region, an opportunity brought by a new openness and a new pragmatism.

Democracy is sweeping Latin America. Dictatorships are now very much the exception. Not long ago, they won.

In addition, economies are being opened up and trade barriers are coming down.

Governments throughout the region - whether in Bolivia, Uruguay, Mexico, Venezuela or Argentina - are exhibiting extraordinary courage in tackling serious economic problems.

But as the governments of Eastern Europe are also realizing, it is one thing to change politics. It is another to turn around an economy. Economic adjustments bring social tensions. Democracy does not tolerate repression. Governments in Latin America must accept the risk of social upheaval while rejecting the techniques of repression. They need our support.

We must do more than applaud the trend towards democracy and the open market. It is something we must actively encourage. Democracy is still a delicate flower. Canada has an opportunity - and an obligation - to help it grow firm roots.