

I have been acting on the mandate of my fellow citizens in taking the lead in a peace process that seeks a political solution to the internal conflict. But we must be realistic about it: while the world problem of drugs continues to be rooted in our countries, choking us with its long tentacles, any effort of ours will be smothered by its enormous power to corrupt and destroy.

The problem of illegal drugs and the implied threat to our democratic systems and the fabric of our societies is not a problem for Colombia alone. Its epicentre lies in each and every one of our countries, which in one way or another form part of the chain of death and grief.

The consequences, which Colombia suffers today more than any other country, are a hidden danger to the whole continent. Not because Colombia is a threat — it is essentially a victim and a combatant — but because every country harbours one symptom or another of this global disease.

Each state should stop pointing at the others and should acknowledge its share of the responsibility before it is too late. Together, we must carry out a strong and integrated strategy to combat illegal drugs.

It is time to admit that no individual or even subregional effort will be strong enough to tackle a scourge of this magnitude on its own. We must therefore strengthen the Multilateral Evaluation Mechanism and equip our strategy with an effective operational structure and with a body for political and judicial cooperation at the highest level, so that scrutiny and monitoring of the problem will be assured.

We must also make the crop substitution process economically and socially sustainable so that small farmers in the countries affected can earn a fair income from growing legal produce.

Colombia, like all countries who have watched the seeds of drugs take root in their soil, needs the open and equitable trade that will allow it to steer its economy in the right direction and to cope with the new imbalances of globalization.

Our country looks forward to the completion of the FTAA negotiations and the agreement's entry into force in 2005. With the same anticipation, we trust that free trade will allow for preferential access to markets for products derived from alternative development programs.

Only if this happens and we have a comprehensive strategy to combat illegal drugs, with international cooperation and equitable terms of trade, can we make common progress against an enemy, a disease whose germ lurks in all our houses, which could become the strongest factor in the destabilization of democracies in our continent.

I am also convinced that to strengthen democracy, it is necessary to achieve the economic stability and growth that ensure true human development. Our societies demand a clear and firm response from those of us who have the responsibility of leading them. A response that simultaneously guarantees the long-term well-being of societies and meets the needs that are basic for survival.