

# Statement

Secretary of  
State for  
External Affairs



# Déclaration

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d'État aux  
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## STATEMENT BY

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR EXTERNAL AFFAIRS,

THE RIGHT HONOURABLE JOE CLARK,

IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS

ON THE SITUATION IN PANAMA

OTTAWA

December 20, 1989.

There was an agreement among members of all parties earlier this afternoon, Mr. Speaker, that it would be appropriate for the three parties in this House to have an opportunity to express their position on the events in Panama, and I have the honour to present a Ministerial Statement which is a little untraditional. I apologize for not having circulated advance copies to my Honourable colleagues in the House, but they will understand the circumstances that prevented that.

I thought, Mr. Speaker, I would try to do three things. First, report upon the situation in Panama as we know it at this stage; secondly, review a train of events which led to the American decision last night; and third, present to the House some observations about Panama, about the possibility of developing a stable democratic system in that country, a country in a region which, with less drama than we see in Eastern Europe, is setting a remarkable example of democracy and of economic courage. It is important that parliamentarians in this House, and countries like Canada, help Panama assume its rightful place in that invaluable process.

First the situation in Panama as we know it. The House will perhaps know that there are 131 Canadians who are registered as resident in Panama. Some of those are Canadians of dual nationality. We have been in touch or have sought to be in touch with all of them by telephone, either through our Honourary Consul in Panama City, or through the Embassy, headquartered in Costa Rica. To the best of our knowledge and our most recent consultations, all Canadians are safe; none is in danger. An official of the Embassy based in Costa Rica will be going into Panama as soon as conditions allow that to be done effectively. Fighting is falling off in Panama City, although there has unhappily been an outbreak of looting now, which is perhaps a natural consequence of the kind of disorder that can arise in those circumstances. Forces loyal to General Noriega have moved into the countryside; Noriega himself has not been captured. If there are further developments, I will try to have them brought to the attention of members who are interested, or will establish a system over the period of the recess in which either Members of Parliament or, certainly, Canadians who have family or interests in Panama, will be able to be kept informed.

As a founding member and signatory of the UN Charter, and as a recent signatory to the Charter of the Organization of American States, Canada unswervingly supports non-intervention in the affairs of a third country. In any event, a most serious event has taken place, and the Canadian government has already clearly expressed its regrets following the American

intervention in Panama. It is extremely important, however, to remind ourselves of the compelling reasons that forced President Bush to authorize intervention of the American troops.

The world has been witness to one of the most systematic betrayals on records -- the betrayal in Panama of those democratic values which we hold dear in this House -- and, indeed, which are respected in most of our neighbours in Latin America and in the Caribbean. Even before that, the governments of Presidents Barletta and Del Valle were very much subject to the whims of General Noriega as Commander-in-Chief of the Panamanian Defence Force.

Canada has not traditionally maintained the most cordial relations with those successive regimes, which we regarded as being democratic in name only. But we were able to carry on correct, business-like relations with them, based on mutual interest.

When, in 1987, General Noriega was indicted by an American court on narcotics trafficking charges, the United States imposed an economic embargo. We did not follow suit.

When the May 1989 elections were called, we held out some hope that the Panamanian people would be permitted to express their democratic will at the polls. When, however, it became obvious that those elections were going decisively against Noriega's chosen candidate, the regime abruptly had the process declared void. Canada condemned that denial of free elections.

All of us were shocked by the images of the violent public beatings of the leaders whom the people of Panama had chosen to govern them. There was a temptation then to respond with violence. That temptation was strong and outspoken among some in the United States. It was resisted; it was resisted everywhere, including principally and most importantly, by the United States Administration.

Various efforts were launched to achieve a peaceful solution to this very difficult problem. Some of them were bilateral, some of them were individual efforts by leaders of other countries. One of the most important was through the Organization of American States.

On July 20th of this year, the Organization of American States passed a formal resolution which called for a

transfer of power, taking effect on September 1st this year, from the Noriega regime to the people who had been elected in the May elections. The OAS also launched a diplomatic mission, headed by the foreign ministers of three of its member countries, who travelled extensively and worked hard to try to find a peaceful way in which this transfer of power could be achieved.

What is lamentable but evident is that that peaceful solution did not work. There was, as we all know, recently an abortive coup. In the past week, there have been developments that were particularly alarming -- would be to anyone in this House, were to many of us -- including the statement by General Noriega that Panama is in a state of war, to use his words, with the United States. That declaration, unilaterally by General Noriega, was followed by harassment of Americans stationed by treaty in Panama; indeed it was followed by the murder of an off-duty member of the American services, and threats to the family of that individual.

It's important here, sir, to emphasize two facts which distinguish the situation in Panama from that which might exist in other parts of the world. One of those facts is that the United States presence there is the result of a treaty. It is not a presence that is the result of an occupation. It is not the result of an uninvited presence by the United States in that country. The American troops are there as the result of a legal agreement -- there as the result of an international treaty. They have a right to be there, and they have a right to be protected while they are there. That is one distinguishing factor and feature about the situation in Panama today.

A second thought that I want to underline is that peaceful solutions had been sought, and peaceful solutions had failed. In fact, what was remarkable for so long was the willingness of the Bush Administration to put its faith in mediation, to put its faith in negotiation, to put its faith in peaceful processes. And the response to that was the murder of an off-duty American stationed there, the response to that 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 US 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 who had a right to be there, and a right to be protected.

Secondly 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.

Now, Mr. Speaker, 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 their 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 this, 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.

Secondly, 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 of 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.

And thirdly, I think there is a lesson here of the real need to strengthen the regional institutions in Latin America, particularly in Central America. It's clear that the Organization of American States, despite its efforts, didn't work in Panama. They were not able to achieve the peaceful

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

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 assistance relations with the five countries involved in the Esquipulas arrangement? Well, we do that, sir, because Central America and Latin America, as a whole, are changing. Changing by their own will.

Carlos Andres Perez, 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 aren't. The role, in his judgement, can be critical if the institutions, and the instinct of reform that have been evident there, are to become as effective as they can be. We have a role to play in helping to prevent Noriegas. We have a role to play in helping to provide alternatives to intervention, because our presence can strengthen initiatives and institutions like the Organization of American States.

Sir, in the Question Period today, in a calmer part of the Question Period today, I had the opportunity to say to my friend from Winnipeg-Transcona that I think it is time for all of us to engage in some new thinking about international events, and I meant that. And I think he shares that view, and I think others in the House do. That means that we have to

move away from stereotypes, whether those stereotypes are about the Americans and about their motivations, or whether they are about proud countries which we can't dismiss simply because they're small.

Now, Mr. Speaker, for anyone interested in the future of Central America, interested in the principles of democracy, this has been a hard day, a hard day for anyone concerned about this hemisphere. It involves a situation which we, in the government, believe is unique. We think, sir, we Canadians have a responsibility to make the most of the new situation which has been created by events in Panama, and that is the intent of this government.