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Statement to the Standing  
Committee on External Affairs  
and National Defence by the  
Honourable Allan J. MacEachen,  
Deputy Prime Minister and  
Secretary of State for  
External Affairs, on his trip  
to Central America and  
Colombia, April 3 to 13, 1984

May 10, 1984

OTTAWA

When I last appeared before this Committee in March, several of you expressed interest in my trip to Central America. Indeed, someone suggested that all members of the Committee might wish to accompany me. Today, I would like to provide the Committee with a report on my trip to Central America and provide you with specific comments on Canadian policy in that region. In addition to this report, I am making available to members a compendium of statements I have made on Central America in the past year which includes transcripts of my statements to the press during and immediately after my trip.

At the invitation of their Governments, I visited Costa Rica, Colombia, Nicaragua and Honduras between April 3 and April 13, 1984. This was the first visit of a Canadian Foreign Minister to Central America and I was warmly and graciously welcomed in all countries. In each of the three Central American countries, in addition to Government Ministers and officials, I also met with members of the opposition, media, unions, churches, Canadian business and non-governmental organizations.

In preparing for my trip, I met with Members of Parliament, the Central American and Contadora Ambassadors in Ottawa, and representatives of a number of Canadian non-governmental organizations active in the region, who outlined to me their concerns about the situation in Central America. My programme was arranged to ensure that I was able to meet persons representing a wide spectrum of interests and views, and in this way, I was able to pursue the particular concerns raised prior to my departure.

The primary objective of my visit was to test the adequacy and direction of Canada's policies in Central America. Another purpose of my visit was to sharpen and extend my understanding of the area as well as to explain Canadian policy to the leaders of these countries.

My visit to the region also provided a timely opportunity to review the relevant recommendations made by the Sub-committee on Canada's relations with Latin America and the Caribbean in mid-1982. In general, Canadian policy was confirmed, particularly the requirements to encourage peaceful economic development, to support regional peace initiatives, to pay greater concern to the plight of refugees, and to remain sensitive and responsive to the problems of poverty and the objectives of our aid program. The issue of external involvement in regional conflict, which was highlighted last week in Washington by the former chairman of the Sub-Committee, Mr. Maurice Dupras, was also a subject of my discussions.

The visit also reinforced my appreciation of the fragility of the vitally important task faced by the Contadora group. The Contadora process was a major item discussed

throughout my visit. It was the particular focus of discussions during my stay in Colombia.

I found a good deal of pessimism about the prospects for Contadora, along with evidence that tensions are increasing. A key factor in this bleak prognosis is the absence of a mutually acceptable basis for understanding between Nicaragua and the USA, despite stated objectives on both sides to seek a modus vivendi.

Earlier this year, the Contadora countries established three commissions to address economic, political and security problems -- the latter dealing with key issues of force levels, verification and demilitarization. During the visit to Ottawa by Foreign Minister Lloreda of Colombia in February, I indicated that Canada would be pleased to collaborate with the work of these commissions in any way which Contadora Ministers might find constructive and appropriate. Although enthusiasm was expressed in several capitals about this offer, there has not as yet been any practical follow through. The commissions have now reported to Contadora and Central American foreign ministers. However, this work goes on and the Canadian offer stands.

Although the obstacles are enormous and the basis for pessimism about its future only too real, I continue to believe that Contadora represents the only international instrument with the potential for reconciliation in Central America. The political leaders with whom I spoke in Colombia, in Central America, and indeed the Mexican President and Foreign Minister in Ottawa earlier this week, are all conscious that the failure of Contadora could lead to a massive and escalating tragedy.

Moreover, there are Contadora achievements. If the present situation is discouraging, it would have been much worse without Contadora. The process has brought the five countries of Central America together for regular discussions. It has taken the heat out of some tensions, if not actually prevented the outbreak of war between Nicaragua and Honduras.

As I have said, we strongly support Contadora, but we are also aware of the temptation to hide behind public statements of support for Contadora without addressing ourselves to the problems which are frustrating the Contadora process. It is my view that more pressure should be applied by the international community, in support of Contadora, to have the forces and military support of third parties removed from Central America. Contadora is vital and if it is to work, it must have the genuine support of all parties.

There were, of course, questions about the Canadian position with respect to U.S. policies in Central America. I explained that there were differences with the United States and that these had been raised in my regular consultation with

Secretary of State Shultz most recently in Washington on April 1 and 2. I understand USA security concerns in the region, but have made very clear our concern about the escalation of USA-supported military attacks on Nicaragua. The Government is also concerned, however, about the military support being given by, for example, Cuba, Nicaragua, and the Soviet Union in the Central America conflict.

The mining of harbours in Nicaragua was extensively discussed. I made it very clear that Canada regards the mining as a dangerous escalation of tension and a serious violation of international law. I also referred to the responsibility of the United States for this activity. However, the mining must be viewed within the overall context of events in Central America. This was the perspective taken by the Contadora Group following the meeting of their foreign ministers in Panama, April 8. They analysed the security situation in the area and included mining as one of the serious destabilizing elements that has occurred recently. I entirely support the position adopted by the Contadora Ministers on this matter. I should also point out that the Canadian government first expressed its concern on the mining to the United States on March 26, six days after a Soviet freighter struck a mine when entering a Nicaraguan port.

As so much attention in Canada has centered on Nicaragua, I had a particularly wide-ranging programme in that country. In addition to speaking to Coordinator of the Junta, Daniel Ortega, and Sergio Ramirez, member of the Junta, Ministers and three members of the government directorate, my delegation and I spoke with the Archbishop of Managua, the editor of La Prensa, the leading opposition newspaper, representatives of Canadian non-governmental organizations, trade union and opposition leaders, representatives of the private sector, and the Human Rights Commission. From these discussions, I was able to see that the perceptions both of those in Canada who strongly endorse, and those who just as vigorously oppose the Sandinistas, do not reflect the much more shaded and complex reality.

Elections, of course, are a key issue. I was interested in the detailed explanation of the arrangements for the forthcoming Nicaraguan elections provided by Comandante Carlos Nunez, as free elections will fulfil one of the objectives of the revolution. Because of the intense military and economic pressures of the Contras, it may not be possible to lift for all areas of the country the emergency law which limits freedom of the press and assembly, but I pointed out that an election without genuine and vigorous opposition is a non-event and that it is equally important that governments preparing for elections be prepared to accept the possibility of losing elections. I also emphasized how important it is for the electorate to have confidence in their electoral machinery.

The first visit of a Canadian Foreign Minister was regarded by the Costa Ricans as a symbolically important indication of Canada's increased interest in the region and a demonstration of support for Costa Rican democracy and its policy of neutrality. In a troubled region, the democratic institutions of Costa Rica stand out as robust and effective. I made it clear that Canada would be significantly increasing developmental cooperation with Costa Rica.

The visit to Bogota provided a most useful perspective on the Central American region. The Betancur government has strong credentials: as a stable democratic government, which has recently concluded very significant peace negotiations with most of the guerrilla factions in Colombia; and as a driving force behind Contadora. A coincidence of outlook in many areas and evidence of some economic recovery provide a promising foundation upon which effective and mutually beneficial bilateral relations can be built.

Honduras is struggling to root a new democratic tradition in difficult soil. Historically, Honduras has been a battle field for its neighbours' wars. Low prices for Honduran staples and the continuing recession in Central America have struck the Honduran economy in much the same manner as its neighbours. As the second poorest country in the hemisphere, we have committed to Honduras a high level of aid. These projects, which are concentrated in agriculture, forestry and rural electrification, are designed to help the most needy sectors of the country. The amounts provided are at present limited by the absorptive capacity of the Honduran economy.

As you know, Mr. Shultz suggested, on the eve of my departure, that I include El Salvador in my Central American tour. I told him that, in principle, I had no objection to the inclusion of El Salvador, but my schedule was already tight and I judged it inappropriate to make an official visit at the height of a Presidential election campaign. Since my return, El Salvador has completed that electoral process. The reports of the Canadian observer team at both rounds of the El Salvador elections have reinforced my view that the decision to send official Canadian observers was correct. Their purpose was to report on the process and so provide the Canadian Government and people with an informed basis on which to judge the elections. On the basis of the last report of our observers, I believe that the electoral authorities in El Salvador should be applauded for the courage, tenacity and competence with which they discharged their duties in challenging circumstances. I would also wish the apparent President Elect, Mr. Duarte, good fortune and continued strength of purpose as he embarks upon the hazardous course of national reconciliation.

In addition to informative discussions on the increasingly serious refugee problem, I was able to review our aid efforts in Central America with representatives of the

Governments of the area, with opposition groups, and with NGO workers in the area. There was a solid consensus in all my consultations on the fact that longstanding social and economic injustices in Central America are the principal causes of current unrest and instability. There was an equally strong consensus that our aid to social and economic development in Honduras, Nicaragua and Costa Rica should continue and expand on its current basis.

There were some who advised that no aid should go to Nicaragua on the grounds that the Nicaraguans are attempting to export revolution to El Salvador. Also, there were some who advised that aid to Honduras should be stopped because that country is supporting the "contras" against Nicaragua. No one, however, supported the termination of aid to both countries.

The part of Canadian assistance to Central America which is significant more for its quality than its quantity, is that provided by the Canadian non-governmental organizations. However, the visit raised some concerns in my mind about the distribution of this assistance and there were some cases where its motivation was questioned. The needs, which can be addressed by skilled and dedicated Canadians, particularly in humanitarian and people-to-people activities, should not be circumscribed by ideological boundaries. It is my hope that political attachments should not distract invaluable work of this kind from its central objectives.

Our aid to Central America is needed, appreciated and highly respected, because it is directed to the basic development needs of people and societies. Canadian aid in Central America will not be determined by the political complexion of the recipients. This is consistent with our view that aid policy is intended to help countries of the region overcome the disabilities which are the primary causes of social, policy and economic injustice. The merits of this Canadian approach to and support for Central America were reconfirmed during my visit and consultations.

I made clear to the Governments of Honduras and Nicaragua that Canada opposes any interference by any country in the internal workings of another. And I recalled that in one special case we had terminated our relationship to one country because that country had diverted combat soldiers to military adventures abroad rather than using its military resources for strictly defensive purposes.

The visit also afforded me an opportunity to hold a meeting with Canadian Heads of Post in the region. The meeting took place in Cartagena and provided a useful, in-depth review of the area and of Canadian policies.

I believe that the visit to Colombia and to Central America was both timely and worthwhile. It was of great value

to me and I would like to think that it was helpful not only in terms of our bilateral relations with the countries visited, but welcome evidence of Canada's growing interest and concern in the region.