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Statement in the
House of Commons by the
Right Honourable Joe Clark,
Secretary of State for
External Affairs, on
his Central American trip
November 21-29, 1987

OTTAWA

December 2, 1987.

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.

Moreover, despite their unanimity, there are deep suspicions among them - doubts that the civil authorities in El Salvador, Guatemala and, to a lesser extent, Honduras will, in the end, be strong enough to control the army, control the police, and end the tradition of repression - and a profound skepticism that the Sandinistas will let real democracy threaten the revolution their constitution describes as irreversible. In addition, each government which signed the agreement must deal with combattants and refugees who have not been parties to this accord, and whose views only become known in piecemeal fashion. That is to mention simply the complexities of the region itself, which are complicated further by the extension to Central America of the competition between the United States and the Soviet Union. So there are plenty of obstacles.

But there is also a genuine commitment to the peace initiative, and a recognition that the alternative is hopeless: continued bloodshed, economic stagnation, the withering of young democratic institutions, and the consequent rebirth of coercive forces of the right and the left.

Canada's interest and involvement in Central America is relatively recent, but our standing is high. Over the last five years we have tripled our bilateral aid to over \$105 million, and, on a per capita basis, our aid to Central America is second only to what we do in the Caribbean. In that period, total direct Canadian assistance amounted to nearly \$170 million, including support for Canadian non-governmental organizations who are active throughout the region. To get some better sense of the people and the countryside, we visited a Farmers For Peace workshop in Nicaragua where farmers are trained to repair machinery, and two NGO projects in southern Honduras, one where Horizons For Friendship helps educate orphans, and the other, a rural clinic operated by Canadian church workers. Members of our delegation visited different CIDA projects - with purposes ranging from purifying water to providing daycare for single parents, to improving dairy production, to building houses, and meeting other practical needs. Some of our delegation also met with human rights groups, womens' associations, artists, and refugees in the camp at Limon. We saw for ourselves the good reputation of Canada, which gives us credentials to contribute to the peace process.

The Accord asks "the respect and support of the international community for our efforts. We have plans in Central America for peace and development, but we need help to make them a reality." I had planned to visit the region sometime before the Spring of next year, but moved that forward after the Esquipulas agreement, to provide a visible signal of Canada's support. I sought to meet, in seven days, as broad as possible a representation of the people and organizations who, because they are involved in the conflict, must be brought into the process of peace. I had meetings with the five Presidents; the five Foreign Ministers; other Ministers and commandantes; the two clerics, Cardinal Obando y Bravo and Archbishop Rivera y Damas who are charged with leading reconciliation in, respectively, Nicaragua and El Salvador; leaders of the political wing of the guerrillas in El Salvador; a contra representative in Costa Rica, Alfredo Cesar, who was once the head of the Nicaraguan Central Bank under the Sandinistas; the Miskito Indian Leader Brooklyn Rivera; Opposition leaders in Nicaragua including Pablo Antonio Cuadra, the noted poet and co-director of La Prensa, and groups preoccupied with human rights.

In addition, our delegation included Lieutenant-Colonel Don Ethell and Lieutenant-Colonel Gerald Thompson, two Canadian officers who have commanded international peacekeeping operations elsewhere in the world. They had detailed discussions with Central American authorities about the practical challenges of designing and operating verification and peacekeeping mechanisms. The Esquipulas plan proposes procedures of verification and follow up, but I told each president of Canada's concern that they were underestimating the complexity of putting such mechanisms in place. A peacekeeping operation must fit precisely the conditions in the region where the peace is to be kept. You cannot simply shift a model that works in Cyprus to the very different conditions of Central America. Our experts believe it could take up to six months to design and mount a mechanism that would prove effective in Central America. I said that Canadian expertise would be available for all or part of that work, if the five presidents agreed unanimously that they wanted Canadian help. I emphasized that we were not seeking an invitation, because we want the decision on this vital question to be taken by Central Americans for Central American reasons. I indicated that there were general conditions of unanimity and authority that Canada requires before becoming involved in any aspect of any peacekeeping operations. I should tell the House that I do not think it would be appropriate to attach new conditions in this case, since the problems in Central America are already complex enough. As a result of our conversations, I believe the five governments have a greater sense of the urgency of getting on with the design of the mechanisms they will need.

Peace and the peace plan are the overwhelming preoccupation in Central America now. Naturally, other issues arise. Let me deal briefly with two of them: the conditionality of aid, and the resumption of our program to Guatemala. There has been a suggestion that, in the special circumstances of Central America, Canada should abandon the principle of not using our aid for political purposes. Part of the reason Canada is respected in the world is precisely because our aid has been designed to help the poorest, the most needy. Other countries, including the United States, use aid for political leverage, and their reputation reflects their practice, as ours reflects our practice. If we make an exception in Central America, we would begin to discount that distinctive, valuable Canadian principle. I discussed the question in Central America, including with President Arias, who understands and accepts Canada's policy. I make the point that it would be consistent with our practice to consider help to special multilateral mechanisms the five presidents might jointly establish to promote democratization or compliance or other specific purposes, in the region as a whole, and as part of the evolution of the peace process.

We are maintaining active development projects in Nicaragua, Honduras, Costa Rica, and El Salvador, and have announced our intention to resume bilateral aid to Guatemala. We will follow in Guatemala the precedent established two years ago in El Salvador, which allows control of our aid to rest in Canadian hands, at least until the program is well launched. That system has proven very effective in El Salvador. Some critics in Canada believe Guatemala should continue to be left out of bilateral programs, because of their human rights record. Unquestionably, abuses of human rights continue. The questions are whether the democratically-elected government of President Cerezo has made enough progress on human rights to justify resumption of aid and whether it is now safe for Canadian aid workers to deliver that program. The Guatemalan Human Rights Commission in exile, the Inter-American Human Rights Commission of the OAS, the U.N. Special Representative for Guatemala, and Amnesty International have all noted signs of improvement in Guatemala under the civilian government, while indicating, as we would agree, that abuses continue. My judgment is that there has been progress, and that bilateral aid relation with Canada will encourage further progress on human rights in Guatemala.

Obviously, another question in Canada concerns the public position we should take regarding the support of the United States of the contras, and the support by the Soviet Union and Cuba of the Sandinista government and of guerrilla activity in El Salvador. We oppose third party intervention in Central America, whatever the source, and have made that position clear to both superpowers. Some Canadians argue sincerely that our Central American policy should concentrate more on public criticism of the United States. I believe that such a policy would reduce, and not increase, whatever real influence we might have in Washington, on this question. It could, in addition, impede our ability to play other, more active roles in support of the peace plan. The five governments of Central America are in no doubt about the difference between Canadian and U.S. policy, and our conduct should be guided by what makes us most effective in Central America itself.

The issue of compliance with the peace plan is most acute in three countries: Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Honduras.

In Nicaragua, real commitments have been made to democratic reform - the formation of a National Reconciliation Commission, the re-opening of La Prensa and Radio Catolica, the re-admission of exiled clerics, and the release of almost 1,000 political prisoners. Earlier this month, the government also expressed a willingness to enter into indirect dialogue with the contras, through the mediation of Cardinal Obando y Bravo. These commitments are real and they are encouraging. But we should recall that, by some estimates, there are still between 7-8,000 political prisoners held in Nicaraguan jails, that some clerics remain in exile, that Radio Catolica was prevented from broadcasting its first newscast, and that the dialogue with the contras is narrowly defined and still in very preliminary stages. There has been no complete amnesty.

In El Salvador, a full amnesty has been granted for political prisoners. Two prominent leaders of the political wing of the guerrilla movement have already taken advantage of this opening to return to that country's legitimate political process. The Salvadoran government has also formed a National Reconciliation Commission and was quick to re-open talks with the guerrilla opposition. As well, El Salvador accepted the repatriation of some 4,300 Salvadoran refugees from camps inside Honduras. However, the violence continues in that country, and the government-guerrilla dialogue was suspended after the assassination of Herbert Anaya, the head of the non-governmental human rights commission. Unfortunately, neither side seems prepared to take the serious initiative needed to resume the dialogue.

Honduras, is a country which does not have an internal conflict, but is plagued with the problems of the contra presence in the south as well as the influx of enormous numbers of refugees from both Nicaragua and El Salvador. The government has formed a National Reconciliation Commission to help deal with these problems. On the refugee side, the government cooperated fully with the UNHCR in the recent repatriation of the Salvadoran refugees from Honduran camps. They have also asked the contras to leave Honduran soil, though to date there has been no measurable movement. I was advised in Honduras that informal discussions may begin soon, between Honduras and Nicaragua, to move toward concrete compliance with the Esquipulas agreement respecting non-use of territory. I remind the House that the notion of simultaneity, so central to this accord, means that implementation of the basic provisions of the accord must occur in lock-step: the contras must be removed from Honduras at the same time as a ceasefire is negotiated between the Nicaraguan government and the contras. Neither objective has yet been reached and each relies on the other.

I expressed at the outset my view of the importance of creating an active, informed, and dispassionate Canadian public opinion, whose interest and judgment might encourage compliance with the peace plan. I think it appropriate that the House of Commons pursue more formally the interest several individual Members have already shown in the region and the process. At the Government's request House Leaders have begun discussions on the appropriate parliamentary committee to allow this House to monitor and encourage the peace process in Central America. I would place before that Committee, on a monthly basis, a report on the current compliance with the plan, and would seek to arrange other briefings and background. It might be useful for the Committee to receive the discussion paper on peacekeeping which was the basis of our conversations last week, and to examine other ways by which Canada can constitute constructively to achieving peace. Officials of External Affairs, CIDA, and other departments would be available to provide information.

Those of us who criticize the superpowers' involvement in Central America often unconsciously commit the error we condemn, and see the region not by its own lights, but in the shadow of a superpower. The initiative of the five presidents is more than an attempt to resolve their own problems. It is an assertion of their distinct destiny. These are five countries with histories, aspirations, identities of their own. Their development has been blunted by repression and poverty and conflict. Trade and tourists shift away from a region known as a "war zone". Economic strategies are displaced by military strategies. Children, who should be in families, are orphaned; youngsters, who should be in school, are at war.

The real issue is not Marxism, nor death squads, nor even the abuse of human rights. Those are symptoms. The root problems are economic and social, and Central America needs peace to resolve them. Five different presidents - with courage and uncommon unanimity - have launched their own initiative for peace. The issue now is whether the five presidents who signed the Accord will respect its principles, and keep moving towards peace, and towards "the climate of liberty that democracy ensures." I believe this House would agree that Canada should encourage and help them.