

Advancing the Framework Treaty on Democratic Security in Central America

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Thank you, Minister Caldera, and I thank all of you for the privilege of being with you today.

The U.S. stands ready to assist you as you continue the process of consolidating defense and security commitments to address the new challenges to peace in Central America, a process you started with the Democratic Security Treaty and the Central American Security Commission (CASC).

I am here to pledge my support and that of my government to work with each of you to further Central American goals on strengthening security and confidence in the region.

Apparently, it is not often that foreign and defense and public security ministers, as well as military leaders, meet in a forum such as this. Coincidentally, three weeks ago, I was similarly fortunate to attend a meeting in Dakar, Senegal, that brought together foreign and defense ministers and military chiefs of defense from the ECOWAS [Economic Community of West African States] countries.

They talked about regional cooperation to advance democratic governance, economic development, and security. Their vision was impressive.

And yet, West Africa is a region in turmoil. Sierra Leone, Cote d'Ivoire, and now Liberia have descended into violence, anarchy and humanitarian crisis, now approaching a catastrophe. It is the equivalent of Hurricane Mitch, without the hurricane.

Contrast West Africa's situation to that of Central America, and the agenda for your deliberations. Central America has embraced democratic governance, placed a priority on promoting trade and economic growth, and recognized the pernicious consequences of regional mistrust, corruption in the public sector, and misallocation of scarce budgetary resources.

Your Presidents have taken some initial yet bold steps toward regional confidence and security architecture. Each is making important contributions to this process. President Bush had the opportunity to congratulate your Presidents on their progress towards an isthmus of peace and prosperity when he met with them this April in Washington.

My message to each government here today is, "Don't look back" -- for there is no turning back. Behind you, in the rear-view mirror, is West Africa; ahead is a century full of opportunity.

There is a strong foundation to build upon and complete the 1995 Framework Treaty on Democratic Security in Central America. I encourage you to act, to embrace your future, and implement the security aspects of the Central American Democratic Security Treaty and its working body, CASC. Without mentioning specific articles, there are several very important and pertinent provisions.

I believe it is important to recognize that there is room for improvement in the status quo.

Presently, Central America is the repository of a hugely excessive supply of small arms and light weapons from the wars of the 20th century -- among them any number of outmoded weapon systems of little, if any, use in the current security environment.

The only parties who would find utility in such weapons are narco-traffickers and terrorists, and those who would take their money.

I encourage you to reduce stockpiles of surplus small arms and light weapons, and take steps to properly manage and secure national stockpiles under democratically -- elected civilian leadership control. This is how we have done it for decades in the United States, and our military and public security services appreciate it.

The signs are clear that those who embrace change will benefit most. In the economic sector, globalization rewards those who reduce barriers to trade. In the military and security sector, those who adapt to 21st century threats will find honor and support in their societies.

Times have changed. Here in Central America, three countries have contributed military units to help stabilize Iraq. Many have specialized skills.

This is the new reality -- more global in outlook. That is because the real threats to Central America's future prosperity and freedom are not neighboring states, but rather transnational actors: narco-traffickers and terrorists, enabled by corrupt and immoral intermediaries.

The confidence and security measures you are discussing are absolutely the right direction for your governments. The question many seem to have is: how to move forward?

Let me say, from experiences elsewhere in the world, that multilateral approaches can either be a roadmap to peace and prosperity, or a convenient excuse for inaction and paralysis.

My advice is to take the initiative -- to identify problems, to be bold in changing old security structures that offer no solution to the problems of today, and to act without waiting for others to do the same.

There is no shame, only honor, in governments openly discussing the problems they face. Our democratic systems have separation of powers precisely to ensure open recognition of the tribulations as well as the triumphs of government.

There is no weakness implied by reducing obsolete weapons, or taking care to control spending on defense. On the contrary, these steps in our military institutions represent a high form of patriotism, because they mean the military will pay close attention to the real threats to physical security of the nation and impose the lightest possible burden on its economic security.

Finally, there is no disadvantage for a government that takes bold, unilateral steps to lead the region forward. Indeed, unless governments lead by example, there will be a risk that the spirit of the Framework Treaty may be open to question.

President Bush took bold action to reduce offensive nuclear weapons that are no longer relevant to the security of the U.S. When the President decided to abrogate the ABM Treaty, many voices warned that this would be destabilizing. Yet President Putin responded to President Bush's unilateral arms reduction with a dramatic unilateral reduction in Russia's offensive nuclear weapons. The result was the Moscow Treaty and a safer world. I hope this example will inspire others to lead the way in Central America's security process.

As a final thought, in our discussions of new threats and security approaches, some may wonder whether traditional military forces are losing their relevance. My answer is, very definitely, "no." There are UN peacekeeping operations around the world; there are stabilization operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, the Balkans, and West Africa. In the United States, particularly since 9/11, the American people honor and depend upon our military and our public security forces to protect the country's security.

And so I appreciate this opportunity to join your deliberations today, and pledge that the United States will continue to support the Central American democratic security process, through our diplomacy, through our law enforcement cooperation, and through our military relationships. I wish you all success. Thank you.