



THE HEIRS OF ESQUIPULAS

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 A Firm and Lasting Peace in Central America:
 The Pending Agenda 20 Years Later
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My dear friends,

I cannot tell you what a tremendous pleasure it is to be here with you today. I understand more than ever the words of that old tango by Carlos Gardel: *“Volver, con la frente marchita, las nieves del tiempo platearon mi sien...Sentir...que veinte años no es nada”* – “returning, with a wrinkled brow, the snows of time have turned my temples silver...Twenty years is nothing.”

First, I just want to point out that I am not the only one getting older: today we celebrate not only the upcoming birthday of the Esquipulas II Accords, but also the actual birthday of the UN Secretary General. Please accept my congratulations, Mr. Ban. We’re all glad you’ve decided to honor Central America today by being here with us, rather than by spending the day snorkeling off one of our beautiful beaches. Maybe you can snorkel in the East River too, I don’t know. You’d probably see some interesting stuff.

We are also very lucky to have my old friend Vinicio Cerezo here with us. I would like to take this opportunity to thank him again, twenty years later, for hosting that fateful conference, for helping to make a small city the source of the transformation of an entire region.

We cannot talk about Esquipulas today without remembering the fallen presidents who cannot be with us. We will always remember the risks they took, the bravery they demonstrated, the words to which they signed their names and the effort they expended to prove those words meant something real. José Azcona, José Napoleón Duarte: may you rest in peace, a peace you earned through the peace you made.

The meeting the five of us had in Guatemala City in August of 1987, and the Accord we drafted, were really about one thing: an inheritance. When we signed our names at the bottom of that document, we signed our last will and testament—as politicians, and as parents. We immortalized in ink our wishes for what kind of future would be passed down to our children.

What did we decide? We willed them freedom. We signed a bond of justice. We left behind a testament of hope.

The document we signed in Guatemala said: our children’s right to life would be sacred. They would grow up amidst a permanent cease-fire. Their countries would be

bases for their own development – not bases for foreign troops. Barracks would disappear and schools would rise, military headquarters would be torn down and hospitals built.

The peace accord, our will and testament, said: our people would be reconciled. Violators of human rights would be brought to justice, but compassion and forgiveness would light our nations' path. If citizens had been forced to flee their homes, they would be able to return, and get the help they needed.

The peace accord, our will and testament, said: our children would grow up in democracies. Their disagreements would be resolved on the floor of a legislative chamber, not in a torture chamber. Their opinions would count, their votes would be tallied, their voices would be heard.

Now, in 2007, the Children of Esquipulas have come of age. They have, as Martin Luther King said in the sweltering heat of a Washington summer, "come to cash this check, a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice."

Today we have come here to the United Nations as auditors, to inspect that transfer, to measure its completeness and speed, to hold that document up to the light, and do everything in our power to make sure the heirs of the peace it promised are not denied what is rightfully theirs.

It has been my personal mission over the last twenty years to make the transfer complete. I have pushed for a treaty that would stop arms from disrupting sustainable development, a treaty that was taken up by the UN First Committee just last year. I have urged Costa Rica's neighbors to complete their demilitarization. I have spoken around the world about the importance of generosity toward Central America's people.

The Arias Foundation for Peace and Human Progress has been there with me, dispensing the funds of liberty. The Albert Schweitzer Institute has been there, underwriting the advance of compassion and understanding between human beings. The United Nations has been there, directing an amazing flow of human capital and energy toward achieving reconciliation. Every organization represented in this room has been there. And here is what we all have seen: the Children of Esquipulas have collected. But they are still owed.

They have collected on our promise of an end to the wars. In the last 20 years, no other region of the world has disarmed, demobilized and reintegrated military personnel as extensively or successfully as Central America. By the start of the new millennium, the civil wars had ended, the foreign troops had left, and soldiers were finding other employment. Panama had even joined Costa Rica as a demilitarized republic. No two countries have a safer border.

The Children of Esquipulas have collected in terms of democratic rights. Today, all Central Americans – men and women, white and black, Maya and mestizo and Miskito – every human being on that isthmus is born with the right to inherit on their eighteenth birthday the sacred right to vote.

They have collected in economic terms – modestly, but something. GDP per capita in Honduras has grown by 65%, in Nicaragua it has grown by 70%, in Guatemala it has nearly doubled and in Costa Rica and El Salvador it has more than doubled. Financial capital that fled the gunfire is coming back: foreign companies invested \$4.5 billion dollars in Central America last year alone. And our exports continue to grow. From hardwoods to software, bananas and melons to fabrics for Fruit of the Loom, palm oil to electronic

components you might find in a Palm Pilot, we have become a trusted workshop for the world.

Our children have collected in terms of health care—modestly, but something. Around the region, the likelihood that a child will die before reaching the age of five has been cut almost in half. Central Americans of all ages are living longer: in the case of Costa Rica and Honduras, more than 3 years on average, and for Nicaragua, Guatemala and El Salvador, more than 7 years longer.

They have collected in terms of education—not enough, but something. Illiteracy has fallen across the region. That means there are thousands more Central Americans who have learned to write and read, thousands more who can claim their cultural inheritance, who can lay claim to the treasure of the words of Dario and Debravo, of the Popol Vuh and the story of Rigoberta Menchú, of a contract for services and a ballot for president.

But even as we celebrate these modest accomplishments, too many Central Americans still cannot find peace. They face a new threat from the *maras*, gangs started by refugees trained in hatred in the ghettos of East L.A., and deported back to their countries of origin. These tens of thousands of lost souls inherited something else after the wars ended. They inherited bitterness, poverty, unemployment, brutal machismo, and contempt for the rule of law. It is heartbreaking to have worked so hard on a peace accord to save these young people's lives, only to have them throw their own lives away.

Central Americans cannot find peace when *maras* terrorize neighborhoods and murder innocents. They cannot find peace when thieves break into their homes and attack them on the street. They cannot find peace when domestic violence rips their families apart.

And not only that, they cannot find peace when preventable diseases continue to attack, amoebas continue to kill, dengue fever grows in strength, malnutrition takes children to their graves. There is one area in which I put my desire for peaceful resolutions aside: diseases do not declare cease-fires—they must be destroyed.

Too many Central Americans still have not found prosperity. 17 million people on our isthmus still live in crushing poverty. They feel the bite of hunger, the savageness of dry thirst, the pain when the food and water they do have makes them sick. On average, 40% of our young people do not attend secondary school—threatening to condemn them to poverty for yet another generation.

But maybe saddest of all, is that even in the face of these new threats, the governments of Central America are still throwing away precious resources on their militaries. In the last decade, they have spent roughly \$35 billion dollars on troops and weapons which have no more wars to fight. Politicians have tried to use the *maras* to justify this spending. But a country's military is not its police force, in training, intent, or effect. And it does not help pay down the deficit of social development that spawns and fuels the violence. When that \$35 billion dollars disappeared from their treasuries, we have to wonder, how many potential teachers, how many thousand doctors and nurses, how many life-saving policemen and firefighters, disappeared with it?

Though our governments sometimes misuse our scarce resources, we have also witnessed an embarrassing scarcity of support from the developed world. In the Esquipulas Accord, we asked for the "respect and assistance of the international community in our efforts." We wrote, "There are Central American ways to achieve peace and development, but we need assistance to make them a reality. [We ask for]

international treatment that would guarantee [our] development so the peace we seek will be a lasting one.”

When we took a step toward peace, we thought, now help will come. But nations that sent money and arms with lightning speed, during our time of war and darkness, became slow to shine down the light of generosity afterward. Though Central America has received small increases in development aid, it has still been far less than the total aid wealthy countries had sent when weapons and troops were involved. Why is it that some nations so easily find money in their budgets for destruction, but have such trouble finding it for development? After twenty years, we all see a stark bottom line: Central America has been punished for achieving peace.

Some used the excuse that we were middle-income countries. They have told almost a million Costa Ricans who live in poverty that the rest of their country is too rich. They will soon tell the Salvadorans who go to bed hungry that per capita GDP is rising too fast. They will continue to tell 40% of the world’s poor, the millions and millions who live in middle-income countries, that other people within their national borders are too well-off for them to deserve help. Central America’s poor once were victims of political ideologies. Now they are victims of a statistical average.

Then came Monterrey. In 2002, world leaders met in Monterrey, Mexico, and made a bold promise: developed nations would dedicate zero-point-seven percent of their GDP to development aid—a modest amount, but still something. The fight against AIDS, the conservation of our environment and the education of our young people would finally get the resources they deserve. Even if countries were classified as “middle-income,” there would be enough aid to reach them. In Central America, we thought, *now* help will come.

But very little has arrived. Monterrey was a promissory note that almost no one has decided to honor. In fact, total aid from OECD countries fell by billions of dollars last year, even as their economies grew bigger than ever before.

My friends, we cannot turn our backs on the goals of Monterrey or Esquipulas, we cannot turn our backs on Central America, and we can never, ever, turn our backs on peace.

It is time for a new energy, a new attitude, and a new plan of action. I am happy to say that today, all three of these things are waiting to spring up from this building.

Today, scholars, students, diplomats, and representatives from NGOs and governments have assembled to lay the groundwork for a Costa Rica Consensus. The idea is simple: debt relief and development aid should reward countries that spend less on their militaries, and more on health care, education, and environmental protection. It is time that the international financial community reward not only those whose budgets are balanced, as it has done till now, but also those whose budgets are moral.

For how will the wounds of war-torn nations heal, if their governments are given money that they then directly or indirectly use to buy more grenades, helicopters and AK-47s, perpetuating the poverty of their people? The Costa Rica Consensus will prevent countries from using the promise of aid to shift funds away from social projects, and toward implements of destruction. By conditioning aid on demilitarization, donors will double their impact.

That is the heart of the Costa Rica Consensus. By the end of the day today, I hope that the wonderful, committed, brilliant minds assembled here will enrich it, refine it, and bring it to life.

My friends,

Whether the will and testament we wrote in Guatemala sees its terms fulfilled is dependent on another kind of will: political will, the will of the people. If we agree, in Central America, that we will bury the last remains of our armies and invest more in health, education and the environment...we will. If we agree, around the world, that we will reward countries that spend ethically, defend the rights of humanity through a spirit of generosity, restrict the illicit trade in arms, and commit to Central America's prosperity over the next twenty years with forty times the vigor that we committed to its last twenty, then...we will. If we agree, here today, that we will make the Costa Rica Consensus a reality, then, my friends, we will.

And when we do, the Children of Esquipulas will take possession of that to which they are rightfully heir. They will stand, from San José to San Salvador, from the mighty temples of Tikal to the caverns of Candelaria, from the shining coast of Mosquitía to the glittering sands of Guanacaste, from Lake Nicaragua to Lake Atitlán, the Bay Islands to Bluefields, from the base of Ilamatepec to the top of Chirripó – they will stand, and, like any heir, know their relatives have fallen, but know too that their lives will be better because of what those ancestors left behind.

And their children and their children's children will enjoy their vast riches, the endless spans of green, knowing no more blood need be spilled. They will delight to feast their spirits on the poetry of Rubén Darío, "*esa palabra empapada en miel hiblea,*" his "words covered with the sweetest honey," to be awash in the current of peaceful rivers of blue, and to swim in a liberty more precious than gold.

Thank you very much.