



## Permanent Misión of Costa Rica to the United Nations

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### **The Brightest Future We Could Dream Of**

Speech before the General Assembly of the United Nations  
New York, 19 September 2006

Dr. Oscar Arias Sánchez  
**President of the Republic of Costa Rica**

Mme President:

Please accept my sincere greetings on behalf of the people of Costa Rica. We wish you every success as President of the General Assembly of the United Nations. My greetings as well to Secretary General Kofi Annan, Nobel Peace Laureate, tireless defender of dialogue and understanding between the peoples of the world.

Mme President:

I come here today filled with the same emotion and the same sense of urgency as the first time I appeared before you twenty years ago. I came at that time burdened with the most profound worries of my people. I came to remind the world that in the waist of America five small nations debated between life and death, between liberty and oppression, between war and peace. I came to ask the international community that it not permit violence to turn Central America into a barren wasteland where the seeds of human dreams could not grow.

The world has changed a great deal since then. The children of Central America no longer receive war as their birthright, and our countries have ceased to be pawns in the global chess game of the Cold War. The world has experienced sweeping technological change and exponential growth in economic exchange between countries, creating opportunities completed unexpected not so long ago.

In the last twenty years we have won memorable victories of the human spirit over strong and ancestral enemies. We saw the blows of the hammers that brought down the Berlin Wall, that signaled the definitive triumph of democracy, of human rights and of the dignity of individuals over totalitarian systems. We saw the end of the abhorrent system of apartheid in South Africa and an unprecedented expansion of democratic governments that today, for the first time in history, are the rule rather than the exception. We saw the definitive installation of environmental awareness at the center of the international agenda, to which the signing of the Kyoto Protocol, and its ratification by 150 nations, is great testament.

We saw impressive progress in human development: the rate of illiteracy on the planet is today half of what it was in 1970, infant mortality has fallen 25% since 1980 and 2.4 billion more people have access to potable water than two decades ago. We saw the emergence of the Millenium Development Goals, endorsed by 189 countries, as a palpable demonstration that, for the first time, humanity is capable of setting great common goals, that we are beginning to understand our interdependence, that, at last, our species is beginning to acquire self-consciousness and behave like a family—a dysfunctional family, perhaps, but a family nonetheless.

Mme. President,

For the Central American, it is impossible to think that things were better in the old days. I am convinced that humanity has reasons to be optimistic and that, as Faulkner said, “I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail.” But I also am aware that the advances we have achieved in the direction of liberty, dignity and wellbeing of human beings

are no more than small victories in a long and epic battle. The road toward the full realization of humanity has barely begun and the obstacles toward that realization are growing.

If we are to continue on the road toward human emancipation from misery, if we are going to turn development and human rights into something more than the utopia that they are today for hundreds of millions of people in the world, it will take more than good intentions. We must summon the courage to recognize things for what they truly are, to rectify mistakes and to make decisions that cannot be postponed.

With optimism and vehemence I propose to this Assembly that we take, today, three courses of action that can have powerful effects on the wellbeing of all people. First, we must denounce military spending, the arms race and the arms trade as offensive to the human condition. Second, we must make a reality, through free trade, the promise that the globalized economy holds for humanity and in particular for the world's poorest people. And third, we must defend with all our strength and eloquence international law and the United Nations, proposing the reforms that will permit us to successfully adapt to the immense changes that the world is going through.

Mme. President,

For quite some time I have argued that the struggle for human development is connected to the struggle for disarmament and demilitarization. Certainly it is not a badge of honor for our species that global military spending has exceeded one trillion dollars in 2005, the same statistic that we had in real terms at the end of the Cold War and eight times the annual investment necessary to achieve in a decade all the Millennium Development Goals in every country on Earth. The investment that the most industrialized nations make in their militaries—and they are responsible for 83% of global military spending—is ten times the resources that they dedicate to official development assistance. For the United States, the richest country on the planet, the amount they spend on their military is at very least 25 times as much as they give in aid. What is this but an eloquent demonstration of twisted priorities and the most profound irrationality?

Because, at the end of the day, rationality counts. Since the tragic events of the 11<sup>th</sup> of September 2001, a little more than 200 billion dollars have been added to global military spending. There is not a single indicator that suggests that this colossal increase is making the world more secure and human rights more widely enjoyed. On the contrary, we feel more and more vulnerable and fragile. Maybe it is time to think of other ways to deploy those resources. Maybe it is time to realize that with much less than that sum we could guarantee access to potable water and primary education for every person in the world, and maybe there would be enough left over, as Gabriel García Márquez once suggested, *para perfumar de sándalo en un día de otoño las cataratas del Niágara*—roughly translated, to perfume the waters of Niagara Falls on one autumn day. Maybe it is time to understand that all this is what would really make us happier and more secure.

Mme. President,

Every arm is a visible sign of the delay in meeting the needs of the poor. I am not the only one to say so. It was said, in memorable fashion, by a man of arms, President Eisenhower, nearly half a century ago:

*“Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children.”*



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But if it is sad that the richest nations, through military spending, are denying development opportunities to the most poor, it is worse still that the poor are complicit in destroying their own future. In effect, it is tragic that the governments of some of the most underdeveloped countries continue to hoard tanks, troops, warplanes and missiles to supposedly protect a population gripped with hunger and ignorance.

My region of the world has not escaped that phenomenon. In 2005, the countries of Latin America spent almost 24 billion dollars on weapons and troops, an amount that has risen 25% in real terms over the last decade and that has risen substantially in the last year. Latin America has begun a new arms race, even though it has never been more democratic and there have been very few military conflicts between countries in the last century.

But for avoiding this impulse, I believe Costa Ricans have reason to be proud. Since 1948, due to the vision of the wise ex-President José Figueres, Costa Rica abolished its army and declared peace on the world.

Mme. President,

As was the case twenty years ago in my first message to this General Assembly, today I can say to you with satisfaction that I come from a country without weapons, that our children have seen neither a tank nor attack helicopter, neither warship nor cannon. I can say to you that in my country, fathers and grandfathers explain to the youth the curious architecture of our schools, in terms that attest to the fact that long ago those schools were military barracks. I can say to you that in my homeland, none of our citizens, man or woman, knows oppression, and that there is not a single Costa Rican that lives in exile. I can say to you today that mine is a nation of liberty.

Costa Rican children always have marched to school with books under their arms and never with rifles on their shoulders. If the old refrain is true, "When a school opens, a jail closes," then Costa Rica also believes that "when a barrack closes, a school opens." Each time a soldier sheds his military fatigues, it allows for many children to put on the uniforms of their schools.

This is a road that neither my country nor I are willing to abandon. And not only that: it is a road that we wish all humanity to follow. And so, today I would like to propose an idea. I propose to you that we all give life to the Costa Rica Consensus, through which we create mechanisms to forgive debt and give international financial support to developing nations that invest more and more in education, health and housing, and less and less in soldiers and weapons. It is time that the international financial community reward not only those whose spending is orderly, as it has done till now, but also those whose spending is ethical.

I propose to you as well, that we approve as soon as possible an Arms Trade Treaty that prohibits countries from transferring weapons to states, groups or individuals if there is reason to believe that these arms will be used to violate human rights or international law, or if there are clear indications that they will be used to harm sustainable development.

I hope that the United Nations, in these sessions of its General Assembly, approves the formation of a governmental group of experts that will write the text of a binding treaty on the subject of international arms transfers.

Mme. President,

If it is time to close the doors on the arms trade and on its infinite wake of death, it is time to open the door on the other form of commerce, legitimate and licit, on which the prosperity of the peoples of the world depends.

I know that in this Assembly there exists a wide range of opinions about the best way to achieve stronger global commerce that gives true opportunities to all countries. Personally, I consider free trade the most appropriate path to achieve this objective. It is a path that, if traveled correctly will lead to greater wellbeing for our citizens.

My country, Costa Rica, is a land of four-and-a-half-million people, one of the smallest in the world. For a country like mine, and in fact for all countries on the path to development, there is no other option but to deepen our integration with the global economy. In eras of globalization the dilemma that developing nations face is as harsh as it is simple: if we cannot export more and more goods, we will wind up exporting more and more people.

Only if we open our economies will we be capable of attracting the flow of direct investment to complement our chronically low rates of internal savings. Only if we open our economies will our local businesses have access to the world's most advanced technology and training. Only if we open ourselves to the world can we develop dynamic sectors of production, capable of competing on an international scale. But above all, only if we open ourselves to the world can we create enough jobs, and jobs of high enough quality, for our youth.

In this last case, the strongest argument in favor of open economies is, plain and simple, their ability to reduce poverty. I often marvel at the tenacity of those who insist that globalization is a strange force causing global poverty to increase. On the contrary, according to the World Bank, the number of people living in extreme poverty fell by almost 200 million over the last twenty years, largely due to the advances of India and China, who have embraced globalization with particular fervor.

Commercial liberalization can be most strongly defended based on the benefits it brings the poorest of the poor. If we truly want to face the great ethical challenge of reducing global poverty, and face it with wisdom and care, the Doha Round must be a success.

But I want to stress that the defense of free trade should be honest and consistent. We should look for commercial exchange that is, in effect, free for all countries. The practice among industrialized nations of pressing for the elimination of commercial barriers only in the sectors in which they have a comparative advantage is ethically indefensible. Developing countries need and demand free trade in agriculture. Until we advance on this issue, we will continue to have to paraphrase George Orwell's celebrated expression: in free trade everyone is equal, but some are more equal than others.

Mme. President,

Developing nations need more help and solidarity from industrialized countries, but above all, what we need from them is consistency. If they extol the virtues of a free market, let that market in fact be free. If in their countries they promote admirable forms of social justice through a welfare state, then let them put this principle into practice on an international scale. If democracy prevails within their borders, let them support a more just balance of power in international organizations.

In effect, the third big challenge that I want to mention today is the challenge of strengthening global governance and reforming its institutions. This task begins with the defense of multilateralism, with the strict adherence of all countries to international law and the fundamental principles of the UN Charter, the most elemental safeguard against anarchy in the world. Costa Rica, as it lacks an army, is perhaps the country that most needs an effective international system to guarantee its security. As such, it is willing to put into the service of this cause all the weight of its example as a disarmed country. But there is a lot left to be done.



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It is essential that the most powerful nations on Earth understand that the supervision of international law and the United Nations is fundamental for their own security, that the mere existence of this forum is one of the great achievements of our species, that the UN is a victory of hope over fear, of tolerance over fanaticism, of reason over force.

Standing here today, I so much would like to hear once more the powerful voice of John F. Kennedy telling the world, as he did in 1961:

*“To that world assembly of sovereign states, the United Nations, our last best hope in an age where the instruments of war have far outpaced the instruments of peace, we renew our pledge of support—to prevent it from becoming merely a forum for invective—to strengthen its shield of the new and the weak—and to enlarge the area in which its writ may run.”*

This is the globalization that can transform for good the life of those human beings: a globalization in which all countries are, as we are here, equal in our rights; a globalization in which each people can make their voice heard and hear the voices of others, in which the exercise of tolerance that we practice every day in this room is the norm and not the exception.

Mme. President,

The great British writer Aldoux Huxley once asked if Earth was not simply the Hell of another planet. I do not think so. It is just a prodigious and complicated place, inhabited by a species that is barely in its infancy and that, like an infant, barely has begun to understand its immense powers to create and destroy.

For good or for ill, our species writes its history in draft form, never clearly, debating, like each of us, a perpetual conflict between the best and worst angels of our nature. In this conflict, the victories of the human spirit, as much as they be certain, are always incomplete, gradual, tentative, and subject to regression. The Earth is not a Hell, it is no more than a place where there is no—and never will be any—perfection, just a goodness and a greatness peppered with miseries, breakages and errors.

The indisputable achievements of the last twenty years tell us that, in spite of our sorrows, human beings continue our march forward. But it is time to repair the expensive errors, correct our course and abandon the destructive customs that will make this march forward infinitely more winding and steep than it should be.

If today we do not confront the rise in military spending and the arms trade; if we do not stimulate the economies of the poorest countries who invest their resources in life and not in death; if we do not conquer the fears and the hypocrisy that impede truly free trade in the world; if we do not strengthen the institutions and the international norms that protect us against global anarchy; if we do not do all this, we condemn ourselves to walk on the edge of a cliff, to live on the wheel of eternal return, descending like Sisyphus after every peak reached.

I believe that it is essential to add to optimism courage and the will to change. I believe it is time that humanity builds the brightest future we could possibly dream of.

Thank you.