



**Costa Rica**

**Misión Permanente ante las Naciones Unidas**

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**Sixty-Fourth Session of the  
United Nations General Assembly  
*General Debate***

Statement by:

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

New York, September 24, 2009

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**Sesenta y Cuatro Período de Sesiones de la  
Asamblea General de Naciones Unidas  
*Debate General***

Discurso de:

**S.E. Dr. Oscar Arias Sánchez  
Presidente de la República de Costa Rica**

Nueva York, 24 de Septiembre de 2009

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## LET US NOT SQUANDER THE MIRACLE OF LIFE

Mr. President:

I greet you in the name of a country 35 times smaller than Libya, and infinitely different in scenery and geography. In place of sandstorms, we receive torrential rains. We know, not the waves of the Mediterranean, but rather the capricious undulations of the Caribbean. Your dunes are our forests, your mosques our cathedrals. But I believe that differences such as these are at the very heart of the United Nations. Aristotle guessed that things are not what they appear. Here, in this place, nations look alike precisely because they are different, because they are each unique in the extensive catalogue of this planet. From this variety that makes us brothers, I desire you the greatest success before this General Assembly.

Mr. President; my friends:

Twenty-three years ago, I spoke for the first time at this podium, an island of reason in the midst of seas of insanity. At that time, I came here bearing the cries of millions of Central Americans who sought a peaceful solution to the civil wars that lacerated our region. I came to ask powerful nations to stop feeding with weapons the procession of coffins in our territories. And I came to defend the right of the peoples of Latin America to build their own destiny, in democracy and liberty.

The second time I visited this hall, I came to ask for support for a Peace Plan that the Presidents of Central America had signed. In those days, no one thought that little Central America would defy the world, and choose life over any threat. No one thought that we would have the strength to confront the powers of the Cold War, and find our own solution to our problems. No one thought that we would be able to sow the seed of democracy in our lands, and then to work on behalf of the human development of our peoples. At that time, we gave a lesson to the pessimists and the skeptics. We refuted with dreams, the nightmares that many expected for us. Today, I come here to recognize the distance we have traveled, but also to warn of the risk of falling back.

Since the last time that I spoke before you, a Central American nation has seen the demon of a coup d'état awaken once again. The armies of our region received nearly 60 billion dollars to combat imaginary enemies, while our peoples struggled against the economic crisis with empty hands. Some leaders defied democratic rules in the most imaginative ways, while everything that was wrong with our continent remained the same, or worse. Poverty continued to afflict more than a third of our inhabitants. One of three young Latin Americans still had yet to see a high-school classroom. Hundreds of thousands of people died because of preventable diseases. The violent death rates of some of our countries exceeded that of countries at war, despite the fact that, with the exception of Colombia, there are no armed conflicts in our region. And millions of trees were felled in countries that, together, are responsible for two-thirds of the loss of forest cover worldwide in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

This scenario is not a hopeful one. For those of us from Latin America, it is difficult not to feel that we are always rescuing our future from the claws of our past; that we are always trying to take off on a runway where some senseless person spilled oil, long ago. We have not achieved greater development. We have not built a better democracy. We have not driven out of our reality the shadow of militarism and oppression. These problems repeat themselves, to varying degrees, in most developing nations – upon which will fall most of the weight of the course of humanity in the next fifty years.

It is the developing nations that will bear the worst part of the struggle against global warming; that will carry the heaviest burden of population growth on the planet; that will be responsible for accelerating the growth of a global economy in which the rich cannot offer much more than what they already generate. We do not yet know the result of the protagonism we have been granted. Our success or failure will depend on whether we have the strength to take on, at least, three fundamental challenges: the strengthening of our democracies; the impulse for human development of our peoples, through the reduction of military spending and of arms trafficking across borders; and the creation of a new international order for the transfer of aid, information and technology to combat climate change.

Developing nations, and middle-income nations in particular, live simultaneously in the Medieval and Post-modern eras. In our race to emulate the experiences of developed countries, we have skipped past fundamental steps. One of these steps is, without a doubt, the patient construction of democratic institutions – something that developed countries spent centuries doing, while we, if we are lucky, spent decades. As a consequence, we lack a true civic culture that extends beyond appearances. We have a democratic architecture that, in many cases, is no more than an empty shell. We have free elections, but no structure open enough to allow any person to postulate his political or ideological offerings. We have formal separation of powers, but in many places power remains a monopoly disguised in various public entities. We have a State of Law, but the force of that Law is tested every day by governments incapable of applying it, or by governments determined to weaken it. We have Political Constitutions and international treaties that reaffirm our adhesion to democratic values, but a population that remains willing to toss aside those values for material goods.

To paraphrase the great Argentinean writer, Jorge Luis Borges, we can say that most inhabitants of developing countries don't identify with the State, which seems to them like an abstract concept, far from their immediate needs. That is why they allow a government to end before its constitutional period has elapsed, or to extend beyond that period. That is why they expect the Administration to offer social aid and public services, but they do not recognize the corresponding obligations of citizens. That is why they prefer caudillos to political parties, messianic leaders to democratic institutions. That is why they boycott the approval of new taxes, in countries whose tax burden is half or even one-third of developing countries'. And that is why they so easily fall for the discourse that attributes national problems to others, rather than assuming the responsibility for designing the mechanisms to confront those problems. All this takes place in the best of scenarios, for in the worst, democracy doesn't even exist.

As long as we continue on this path, placing our hopes in developing nations will be like pouring water into a sack. As long as we fail to dedicate more international attention, and more

international aid, to strengthening and perfecting democracies in this world, we will watch again and again as our countries try to take off from that slippery runway.

This challenge becomes even more urgent because of the threat of an arms race that, each year, moves 1.3 trillion dollars internationally. The combination of strong armies with weak democracies has proved to be harmful in every corner of the planet, and above all in Latin America, which during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was a showcase of dictatorial horrors, fed by the existence of an omnipresent military apparatus. I will never tire of repeating it: in Latin America, and in a substantial portion of the developing world, armies have not served any purpose than to carry out a coup d'état. They have not protected their peoples; they have oppressed them. They have not safeguarded liberties; they have overrun them. They have not guaranteed respect for popular will; they have mocked it.

What is the threat for our nations? What is the great enemy of Latin America, that leads it to spend 165 million dollars a day on weapons and soldiers? I assure you that these threats are far less significant than the threat posed by, for example, the mosquito that carries malaria. They are less than the threat posed by drug cartels and street gangs, that sustain themselves thanks to an unrestricted market of small arms and light weapons.

This is a matter of putting our priorities in order. Costa Rica was the first country to abolish its army and declare peace on the world. Thanks to that visionary decision, thanks to the liberating army of Commander José Figueres, who renounced arms forever, we have the opportunity today to invest our resources in the things that matter. And while we know that not all nations are ready to take such a radical step, we do believe that the gradual and progressive reduction of military spending is not only a good strategy for allocating resources, but also a moral imperative for developing nations.

For that reason I ask you, once more, to make the Costa Rica Consensus a reality. This initiative would create mechanisms to forgive external debt, and support with international financial resources, developing countries – poor, or middle-income – that invest more in environmental protections, education, health, housing and sustainable development for their peoples, and less in arms and soldiers. And I ask you as well to approve the Arms Trade Treaty, which is known to this organization, and which seeks to prohibit the transfer of arms to States, groups or individuals, when sufficient reason exists to believe that those weapons will be used to weaken human rights or International Law. I assure you that these two initiatives will make us safer, and certainly more developed, than the costly machinery of death that currently consumes our budgets.

What's more, spending on arms deprives us not only of economic resources. It deprives us, more than anything else, of human resources. The greatest arsenal of genius in the world is, at this moment, working on perfecting the weaponry and defense systems of nations. That is not its place. Its place is in the laboratories where medicines are being created that are accessible for all humankind. Its place is in the classrooms where the leaders of tomorrow are being formed. Its place is in the Governments that need guidance to protect their harvests, their cities and their populations, from the effects of global warming.

We have included sustainable development in the Costa Rica Consensus, because we believe there is a relation between arms and the protection of the environment: first of all, because arms and wars generate more environmental devastation and more pollution than any productive activity; and secondly, because the mere existence of military spending constitutes, in and of itself, the negation of resources to combat global warming. Every armored helicopter, every war tank, every nuclear submarine, represents, in practice, forests that are not protected, technologies that are not becoming less expensive, and adaptations that are not taking place.

Few weeks remain before the Climate Change Summit in Copenhagen, where every country must assume commitments much greater than today's. Costa Rica will attend the summit with its head held high, because unilaterally, and with great sacrifices, we have given ourselves goals that are more and more challenging. We have launched an initiative known as Peace with Nature, through which we propose, among other things, to become a carbon-neutral country by the year 2021. In large part, this is possible thanks to the nearly four decades we have spent protecting our territory, replanting our forests and safeguarding our natural species – and also because, at the same time that we abolished our army, we created pioneering institutions devoted to the search for renewable energy sources. Today, more than 95% of our electricity comes from water or wind, from the depths of the Earth or from the rays of the sun.

Infinite challenges remain, for Costa Rica or for any other middle-income country. The world's rich nations, which developed in the most unsustainable way possible, cannot now place limits that choke the development expectations of all other countries. The effort must be directed, instead, to forming a global platform that allows us to transfer international aid, information and technology efficiently from one nation to another; a platform that will only make sense if the member countries of the OECD increase official development aid, which today stands at 120 billion dollars per year. When it comes to mitigating and adapting ourselves to global warming, the world must share, not compete.

Mr. President; my friends:

These three challenges – strengthening democracies, reducing military spending, and cooperating to confront climate change – constitute, perhaps, the most ambitious agenda humanity has ever taken on. Not I, nor my Administration, nor Costa Rica, will refuse this historic call. For we cannot fail. We cannot rest. We cannot turn back when we are at the vanguard of 6.8 billion human beings.

We are still like Adam and Eve, in an ideal Paradise, minutes before being expelled by our own arrogance. Our sense of responsibility, our humility and our courage, will determine whether we lose our opportunities on Earth – whether we squander the miracle of life that has brought us anguish and pain, but has also allowed us to know happiness. The greatest Costa Rican poet, Jorge Debravo, said that hope is as strong as bone, more powerful than imagination and memory. May that hope, which still exists, give us strength to begin the last race of unsustainable civilization, and the first of the civilization that will survive, and succeed us all.

Thank you very much.