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Ten Years After Esquipulas: Looking Toward the Future

H.E. Dr. Oscar Arias Sánchez

Distinguished World Leader
Lecture Series



The Academic Council on the United Nations System

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H.E. Dr. Oscar Arias Sánchez

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ACUNS
Brown University, Box 1983
Providence, RI 02912-1983

Telephone: 401/863-1274
Fax: 401/863-3808
E-Mail: ACUNS@brown.edu
Internet: <http://www.brown.edu/Departments/ACUNS>

Thomas G. Weiss, Ph.D., Executive Director
Melissa Phillips, Program Coordinator
Janet Kalunian, Program Assistant
Kevin W. Dahl, Staff Assistant

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ABOUT THE
DISTINGUISHED WORLD LEADER LECTURE SERIES

The Distinguished World Leader Lecture Series was inaugurated in 1997 by the ACUNS Board of Directors. In keeping with the objectives of the Academic Council, this series brings the words of distinguished leaders to scholars, lawyers, practitioners, and others who are interested in international affairs and global governance.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Oscar Arias Sánchez is the former President of Costa Rica and 1987 Nobel Peace Laureate. He holds international stature as a spokesperson for the developing world, championing issues including human development, democracy, and demilitarization.

Dr. Arias studied law and economics at the University of Costa Rica and in 1974, he received a doctoral degree in political science from the University of Essex. After serving as professor of political science at the University of Costa Rica, Dr. Arias was appointed Minister of Planning and Economic Policy. He won a seat in Congress in 1978 and was elected secretary-general of the National Liberation Party in 1981. In 1986, Dr. Arias was elected President of Costa Rica.

In 1987, President Arias drafted a peace plan to end Central America's regional crisis. Widely recognized as the 'Arias Peace Plan,' his initiative culminated in 1987 with the signing of the Esquipulas II Accords on the "Procedure to Establish a Firm and Lasting Peace in Central America." In that same year he was awarded the Nobel Peace prize. In 1988, Dr. Arias utilized the monetary award from the Nobel Peace prize to establish the Arias Foundation for Peace and Human Progress.

TEN YEARS AFTER ESQUIPULAS: LOOKING TOWARD THE FUTURE

H.E. Dr. Oscar Arias Sánchez

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the organizers of the Academic Council on the United Nations (ACUNS) for having chosen Costa Rica as the site of their Tenth Annual Meeting. It is a pleasure for me to welcome all of you to our country, and I hope that this will be a fruitful meeting. Your distinguished presence in Costa Rica comes at a time when we are preparing to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the signing of the Central American Peace Accords. The Accords provided the framework for a pacification and democratization process that, albeit not yet finished, allows the women and men of our region to hope for a future without violence. Certainly, much remains to be done; however, we cannot disguise our satisfaction of knowing that the last military conflict in Central America, the civil war that devastated Guatemala for almost four decades, has ended.

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Central America is often described with a series of common places, prejudiced perceptions, and caricature-like realities. Recently, the successful novel *Jurassic Park*, whose plot develops principally on one of Costa Rica's Pacific islands, gave rise to a movie with the same title. So as to not break with any stereotypes, Hollywood made San José, our capital, appear to be a sleepy seaside port covered with a meager vegetation of palm trees.

As you have seen, San José is located in a valley situated at an altitude of over 1,000 meters, and the coast is at least 100 kilometers away. As to the vegetation that surrounds us, I hope that all of you have taken a quick look through your hotel room window and seen that it consists in more than a few varieties of palm trees.

One could easily imagine a different scenario. If the movie had not been about dinosaurs, it would have reminded us that throughout its history, Central America has suffered an abundance of coups d'état and civil wars, exceeded perhaps only by those in post-colonial Africa. A well known caricature has, in exaggeration, called our region "the Balkans of America." It is true that the Central America Federal Republic broke into pieces during the middle of the nineteenth century and that the resulting independent states experienced reoccurring military conflicts among themselves from then on. However, our history does not hold a chapter comparable to the atrocities of ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia, or the twisted crimes of the Balkans during the Second World War.

At a certain point in our history, a military conflict broke out between two Central American countries over a territorial dispute. As is the case with most wars, especially those that can be settled before an international tribunal, this war was the product of the two fighting governments' leaders. Nevertheless, the international press lightly dubbed the conflict the *Soccer War* since the beginning of hostilities had coincided with an agitated sports confrontation. Years later, however, no similar nickname was given when a blind and irrational nationalist outburst resulted in dozens of deaths in the bleachers of a European stadium.

All in all, it is important that, during the 1980s, war and peace were no longer treated as marginal themes in our region. Nor were they seen as problems left to be solved

by the U.S. government through a military intervention that would take place unbeknownst to the rest of the world. A political and military crisis with global ramifications ensued because of the civil wars in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala; the clashing USSR and U.S. interests in those conflicts; the destabilization that threatened Costa Rica and Panama; and the imminent armed confrontation between Honduras and Nicaragua.

The shadow of the Cold War, already in its final stages, exacerbated military and political conflicts in the region. This was especially noticeable as of 1979 with the arrival of a Marxist regime in Nicaragua. It was not a simple coincidence that, among the small Caribbean states that declared independence from Great Britain after the Second World War, the only one involved in a political conflict that was settled militarily was Grenada. In the eyes of the United States, this diminutive state would have installed a Marxist regime in alliance with Cuba and the Soviet Union. Superpower intervention was the largest obstacle that confronted the Central American leaders as we searched for dialogue and negotiation mechanisms that would end the wars and the threat of new wars in the region.

Obviously, the origin of the Central American crisis is not due exclusively to the Cold War. The East-West confrontation only contributed to the internationalization of a series of internal conflicts whose roots were anchored in decades of dictatorships, marginalization, and exploitation. The arrival of the Sandinistas in power was the result of the Nicaraguan people's long struggle against the Somoza family dictatorship, which had been installed by the United States during an intervention staged fifty years earlier. The Somoza dictatorship crushed all intents to democratize Nicaraguan society and perpetuated the conditions of

misery and exploitation that led logically to an uprising by the people.

In the beginning, the armed conflicts in El Salvador and Guatemala were also popular uprisings against government exploitation and oppression. By 1986, civil wars, foreign intervention, and the lack of democratic conditions for development had converted Central America into a dangerous source of international tension. As the Central American presidents worked to end the violence, the most important obstacle we confronted was the Reagan Administration's intention of finding a military solution to Nicaragua's specific problem, which had been oversimplified as the need to eliminate a Marxist regime.

Yet, from our point of view, a quick military solution in Nicaragua was nothing short of impossible given that other foreign powers were willing to maintain economic and military aid to the Sandinista government indefinitely. Furthermore, we believed that even if the supposed rebel anti-Marxist forces, the *Contras*, could attain military victory with the help of the United States, the combination of Central American problems would remain unsolved and violence would continue to grow in the future.

Under these circumstances, we took the initiative and began a strictly regional negotiation process, in order to discuss all the factors contributing to the wars. Even though this initiative was not supported by the United States and was skeptically received by many Central American actors, we were able, after much persuasion, to obtain the backing and sympathy of numerous governments across the world and the opinion of the international public. These efforts led to the signing of the Esquipulas Peace Accords in August 1987 and the beginning of what we consider today to be a successful democratization and pacification project in Central America.

A unique aspect of the negotiation process was that the regional governments agreed from the onset that peace and development could not exist in Central America if democracy was not enforced throughout the region. As far back as we could remember, there had been no previous multilateral negotiation process in which the primacy principle of democracy became a prerequisite for the resolution of an international conflict.

It is true that, at the end of the Second World War, those countries occupied by the United States and its Western allies had to install democratic regimes as a condition for the recovery of their independence. But that was the victors' *diktat* and not a negotiated accord among equally autonomous actors. At the same time, various European countries were inevitably condemned to living under totalitarian governments because of their incorporation into the Soviet Union's sphere of influence. In this way, the subjugation of some countries was the price paid for the democratization of others.

In Central America on the other hand, guaranteeing respect for democracy was made a regional priority. This achievement was an important Central American contribution toward the global strengthening of democracy and a promising example of our ability to confront peacefully the great political challenges of our time. If we include our resolution to integrate politically, socially, and economically, as stated in the Central American Peace Plan, then our experience puts to the test an authentically Latin American solution to the new conditions created at the end of the Cold War. It was encouraging that the disappearance of the socialist block coincided with the strengthening of democracy in our region and not with the consolidation of authoritarian regimes that, in the past, had made fighting communism their *raison d'être*.

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As a final result, we can say that Central America has established the conditions that will guarantee peace and enforce democracy in the long term. In reality, there are no motives for international tension, except for small territorial disagreements that can be resolved through arbitration or, following the example of the last territorial dispute between El Salvador and Honduras, through recourse to an international tribunal.

This evaluation of the perspectives for peace is enriched by the advancements we have made in the area of demilitarization. Since 1948, Costa Rica has been an independent state without an army. Our status as a demilitarized country was consolidated in 1949 through a constitutional amendment that prohibits the creation of armed forces and places the security of our citizens in the hands of a civilian police corps. Although we know that the total elimination of armed forces is not possible in all the region's countries—at least for the time being—the Arias Foundation for Peace and Human Progress undertook in 1990 a long and laborious campaign to convince the people of Panama and their leaders that the time had come to adopt a similar constitutional norm. Various independent groups and media organizations in Panama united with our campaign. Without describing all the intricacies of the process, I am happy to say that, at the end of 1994, a clause prohibiting the existence of armed forces was incorporated into the Political Constitution of Panama. Now there exists a border between two countries without militaries and, precisely because of this, it is the most secure border in the world.

We would have liked to accomplish the same feat in Nicaragua. In fact, the gradual elimination of Nicaragua's

army was proposed. Unfortunately, in what we consider to be an erroneous decision, the military was institutionalized instead with the promulgation of a military code which, in our opinion, was unnecessary and backward. Nevertheless, there was a reduction of the Popular Sandinista Army—today the Nicaraguan National Army—from 90,000 to approximately 14,000 troops and that, in and of itself, is a fundamental step forward. Similarly, the Salvadoran army underwent a considerable downsizing and, in light of the accords that brought an end to El Salvador's civil war, further reductions can be expected in the future. In Guatemala, it was agreed that the armed forces be reduced by one-third; in Honduras, civil society is fighting to reduce the political and economic influence of that country's armed forces, which acquired excessive preeminence and privilege during the Central American crisis.

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As to democratization, it is very encouraging that, beginning in 1990, all Central American governments were brought into power through legitimate elections, most taking place under rigorous international observation. The electoral legitimacy of the region's diverse governments and the meaningful demilitarization process that I have just described have been two important factors in consolidating peace in Central America. However, we cannot say that the deep-rooted causes of instability and war have been overcome.

Peace is not simply the absence of war. Peace is truly achieved when the causes of violence have been eliminated. As long as misery and injustice prevail, violence will have its own justification for existing. For the people of Central America, as well as those in other developing

countries, the consolidation of peace will not be possible if inequality and poverty are not overcome.

Misery, sickness, ignorance, oppression, and violence continue to burden our region and, in the most promising of cases, will take decades to surmount. We must urgently solve these problems before our people, out of sheer frustration and impatience, search for alternatives to democracy.

We have determined that, although the primacy of a democratic system is indisputable, it is time to ask ourselves for how long and to what extent our people will endure poverty in order not to disturb democracy. And the most developed of societies, those that have the greatest to gain from global stability, must also ask themselves how long their power and splendor will last if most of mankind is traveling backwards on the road to development.

We have discovered that our new democracies are being painfully borne, contaminated by violence, hunger, crime, drugs, lack of housing, corruption, sickness, lack of education, neglect for children, women and the elderly, demographic explosion, and environmental degradation.

But the true fundamental threat to our democracy is the growing gap between the wealth of the few and the poverty of the many. After almost two centuries of independence, there are hundreds of thousands of people in Latin America that continue to live on one dollar a day. At the same time, many wealthy Latin Americans can be found on the lists of the world's most affluent individuals. There is even a Latin American country where twenty-four multi-millionaires possess more wealth than the poorest twenty-four million citizens.

Poverty and income inequalities are, without a doubt, the biggest challenges our societies must confront. We

must acknowledge that planned economies were an economic failure for their lack of efficiency and a political failure for their incompatibility with democracy. This, in turn, revives a two-hundred-year-old idea that market economies and free trade offer the best means to further human development. I must emphasize that a market economy and free trade generate possibilities, not certainties. We can transform those possibilities into realities if we refuse to replace the Manichean mentality of the Cold War with a monochromatic view of the world that is resigned fatally to inequality. The destiny of peoples and nations cannot depend exclusively on the results of competition between individual self-interests.

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Within the diagnostic of our region's ills, and those of the developing world in general, we must also make room for corruption. Any attempt to give our future a sense of purpose and meaning must include the struggle for transparency, honesty, and credibility on the part of political and economic leaders.

If corruption has brought instability to some of the older, parliamentary democracies in Europe, it represents an even greater threat to Latin America's nascent democracies. Regretfully, some developed countries continue to allow national businesses to write off as legitimate expenses commissions and bribes to foreign leaders and officials. This practice specifically stimulates corruption in developing countries. Perhaps it would be superfluous to repeat, before such a cultured Hispanic audience, the well-known verse of Mexican poet Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz:

*Who is more to blame
although each doeth harm:
the one who sins for pay
or the one who pays for sin?*

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You have gathered together here, inspired by the desire to promote two fundamental aims of the United Nations—peace and justice—by strengthening international law and the democratic institutionalization of states. Because of our own experiences, we Costa Ricans know that developing countries depend most on the enforcement of international law; therefore, our countries must support the strengthening of the judicial institutions that guarantee those norms.

The Central American peace process was founded legally on the sovereignty of five small countries as well as the signing of a peace accord that was widely recognized by the international community. The Esquipulas Accord was superior morally to all the foreign pressures that had opposed our dream for peace. I have stated repeatedly that the first wall to fall was not in Berlin. The first wall that crumbled was the wall of intolerance in Central America. It was here that the myths and prejudices surrounding the steadfastness of ideological borders and the need to use violence to enact change were dispelled. It was in Central America that, for the first time, a Marxist regime, product of a violent revolution, submitted itself to good faith dialogue and the rules of democracy. Until that time, such a scenario had been deemed impossible because Marxism was reputed to have unquestionable strength and durability. As we know, this was later proven to be false. At the Esquipulas negotiating table, for the first time ever, Central America's presidents effectively equated the idea of gov-

ernmental legitimacy with electoral freedom, respect for human rights, and the express renunciation of the use of force. At the time, we manifested explicitly the need to disarm and demilitarize our societies. The determination to lower military expenditures in our countries as much as possible and to redirect those funds to social investment was based obviously on an ethical belief. However, its origin also lay in the understanding of the pivotal role of education in our peoples' development.

As long as our societies are unwilling to make a concerted effort to invest in education, they will remain limited inevitably to a life of economic underdevelopment, political authoritarianism, and social disintegration.

Today there is virtual consensus that the educational level of a people and a nation is the most decisive variable for their future economic prosperity. At the same time, disparity of educational opportunities is the most powerful factor in the creation of social inequalities. It is imperative that we educate in order to consolidate democracy, to convert inhabitants into citizens and, once and for all, to cast aside the fictitious idea that has weighed down Latin America since its independence: the belief that it is possible to establish a republic without republicans.

It is necessary to educate our people in order to avoid, to the extent possible, their succumbing to the glib words of demagogues and despots. Our people must be made aware of their civil rights and responsibilities so that they proceed to claim the former and respect the latter, in full consciousness of their implications.

More than any other factor, our future depends on our societies understanding the urgency of undertaking this crusade. Our leaders must comprehend that this endeavor will require abundant resources that can be attained, but

only if our leaders have the courage to make difficult political decisions, such as reforming tax systems and reducing military expenditures. This will only happen if our politicians adopt a historical vision and are able to envision a future beyond the next elections. Our leaders must understand that, now more than ever, to govern is to educate.

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Today, many of the world's poorest people continue to suffer the innumerable effects of bellicose confrontations exacerbated by the commercial greed of arms suppliers. Currently, the largest arms supplier in the world is the United States, but each contemporary civil or international war represents a mottled catalogue of arms fabricated primarily by the five permanent members of the UN Security Council. For this reason, I am dedicating most of my time and effort to the promotion of an International Code of Conduct on the Transfer of Arms. A committee comprised of numerous individuals and organizations that have been awarded the Noble Peace Prize have joined this effort. A few days ago, various members of the committee accompanied me in New York for the presentation of the Code to the general public. Our hope is that some day it will be introduced before the UN General Assembly.

Latin America and the Caribbean represent the region of the world that has most demilitarized after the Cold War. But this should not be used as an argument to hinder further military reductions. Nor should it be used as a justification for high technology weapon purchases that could initiate an arms race in the region. There is still an outrageous amount of unnecessary arsenals and troops within the region representing a lamentable waste of precious resources that could

be used to satisfy our societies' most basic needs. Under such circumstances, poverty, the greatest adversary of democracy and human development in our countries, will not stop expanding.

Currently in our region excellent conditions exist for the promotion of multilateral and regional agreements that would limit arms purchases. We have always condemned arms-producing and -exporting countries whose commercial avarice is the primary cause of elevated military expenditures in the developing world. Often in our region, weapons acquisitions originate out of contract negotiations by arms manufacturers and, frequently, diplomatic pressure from the countries that are home to the arms industries. It is paradoxical that developed countries justify arms trafficking as a natural response to an existing demand while, at the same time, they insist that drug trafficking be restricted on the supply side.

A few weeks ago, the Council of Freely-Elected Leaders of the Americas met in Atlanta, Georgia. I proposed that the Council ask arms-exporting countries to halt the arms race they are spurring in the poorest countries of the world. I think that the time has come for purchasing countries to enact regional accords that, above all publicity or diplomatic pressure, will allow for the reduction and control of arms purchases. I also proposed that Latin American countries adopt a two-year moratorium on acquiring high-technology weapons and to negotiate a treaty during that time binding all the region's governments not to purchase such weapons.

These initiatives, welcomed by the Council and submitted immediately for the consideration of the governments in Latin America and the Caribbean, are urgently needed. The United States is on the verge of reversing a policy that banned selling high-technology fighter aircraft to Latin

America; in fact, Lockheed Martin has already been authorized to initiate preliminary negotiations with Chile for the sale of twenty-four F-16 fighter jets at a cost of no less than twenty-five million dollars per plane. Eliminating this policy ban, which was adopted by the Carter Administration when the region was riddled with dictatorships, will result in a tragic South American arms race. Tragic not only because it would reverse the now almost inexistant possibility that international conflict could explode in the region, but also because it would lead inevitably to increased poverty and a deterioration in the quality of life for most Latin Americans. The democracies that have emerged in our region are fragile. Our children need schools not fighter planes, teachers not tanks.

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The support of the United Nations academic sector is today, more than ever, indispensable. We should lament that within important institutions like the U.S. Congress there are still leaders who continue to undermine the UN system by conditioning their financial contributions. Such an attitude detracts greatly from the constructive example corresponding to the country that today exerts indisputable world leadership. Yet, I have faith in your ability to stop this trend and, with the support of the United Nations, fend off the pressures and threats that come from unsympathetic politicians. For this reason, I enthusiastically join the Secretary-General of the United Nations in commending ACUNS for its endeavors.

