

Oscar Arias Sánchez

28 november 2011

His Excellency
Michel Martely
President, the Republic of Haiti

Your Excellency,

While I have not had the pleasure of meeting you personally, I take the liberty to write you regarding a particular issue in your country, whose political life I follow with enormous interest. My words emerge from the affection I feel for the Haitian people. I seek not to show disrespect for the sovereignty of a sister nation, but simply to share advice I see written on the wall of human history: in Latin America, most armies are enemies of development, enemies of peace and enemies of freedom.

In much of the world, and above all in our region, armed forces have been the source of our most painful shared memories. It was a military boot that trampled the human rights of our brothers. It was a general's voice that pronounced the most bloody capture orders against students and artists. It was at the hand of a soldier that innocent people were betrayed. In the best possible scenario, Latin American armies have meant prohibitive expenditures for our economies. In the worst scenario, they have meant a permanent source of instability for our democracies.

The *Politique de Defense et Sécurité Nationale* includes various objectives, such as the presumed necessity to recover Haitian dignity and sovereignty through the reinstallation of the army. Haiti does not need to raise an army once more. Its internal security can be ensured by a professional and well-trained police force, with the resources it needs to ensure that the law is enforced. The nation's security gains nothing from a military structure that could never rival its neighbors'.

As you know very well, Haiti, Guatemala and Nicaragua have claimed the lowest three places in our region in the Human Development Index published by the United Nations. It may be no coincidence that these three countries also share other characteristics: they have, or have had, strong armies and reduced social investment in education and health. The \$25 million sought by the *Politique de Defense et Sécurité Nationale* should be invested in education for your people, in health for your children, in strengthening your democratic institutions to guarantee a minimum of political stability - all this with the goal of recovering the confidence of Haitians and of the institutions that offer international aid, an indispensable source of support, now and for some time to come.

Costa Rica, like Haiti, is also a small country. Its tropical climate exposes it to storms and to hurricanes, along with other natural disasters. However, my country is 69th in the world on the Human Development Index, and a child born today in Costa Rica has a life expectancy of 79.1 years. Haiti is ranked 145th, and the life expectancy of a Haitian child is 17.4 years less than that of a Costa Rican. We could speak in a similar vein of Costa Rica's years of schooling, or the efforts to reduce the digital divide, or the

program "Avancemos" (Let's Move Forward), which offers a stipend to mothers who need it so their children will not drop out of school. The difference between one country's people and another is found first and foremost in education, in years of schooling, in continuing education and in widespread access to information and communication. The people who live in an educated society have many more opportunities and can aspire to higher-quality jobs.

President Martely, there was a time when my country was bordered both to the north and to the south by dictatorships. There was a time when the sound of machine guns could be heard very close to our borders. Instead of taking up arms, Costa Rica stepped forward to struggle for peace in Central America. We did not need an army. On the contrary: our status as a demilitarized nation allowed us to be seen as allies by all sides of the conflict.


In 1994, following an intense debate among diverse political groups in Panama - a debate in which both I and the Arias Foundation for Peace and Human Progress participated actively - their Congress approved, through a constitutional amendment, the abolition of Panama's armed forces. Ever since, Costa Rica and Panama have shared the most peaceful border in the world. It is not by chance that these two countries also have the most successful economies in Central America, because the money we once spent on our armies is now invested in the education of our children and the health of our citizens.

In 1995, Haiti decided to demobilize its armed forces and thus put an end to a long-standing cycle of coups d'état. It was a decision that the entire world applauded. Once again, the Arias Foundation and I played a part in supporting this wise choice. For Haiti, its entry into the select group of Latin American countries without armed forces, along with Costa Rica and Panama, meant that a window of hope was opened - a window that should never be closed.

Mr. President: my tie to Haiti began nearly twenty years ago. Ever since that time, I have asked the developed world not to abandon Haiti, to forgive its external debt, to offer it a hand, to give it abundant and timely aid, to ensure that indifference would never be an option. But Haiti has its own responsibilities, and one of those is to adopt wise political decisions. To reinstall the army would be an error, and that is why I cannot keep silent.

Haiti can recover its dignity when all its children and young people can face their future with hope, and the winds of the Caribbean bring good fortune to all. That is what your people deserve, Mr. President. Count on my support to help achieve it.

Yours in brotherhood,



Oscar Arias Sánchez

Former President of Costa Rica 1986-1990/2006-2010
Nobel Peace Laureate 1987