

Speech by the Secretary General of SICA, Ambassador Aníbal Quiñónez, during the 1st Meeting of SICA Countries on Juvenile Violence

Today, we attend a meeting of great significance to the Central American Integration System; a meeting where we will try to fulfill and follow-up the mandates of the Presidential Summits, particularly those that deal with violence, and in this case, juvenile violence, on which the Security Commission of the Central American Integration System is working very hard.

On September 2006, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the General Secretariat of the Central American Integration System (SG-SICA) signed an agreement to carry out a regional activity for prevention of "gangs" with the purpose of supporting civil and community organizations from Central America in the implementation of gang prevention activities aimed at youths at risk, in order to strengthen their capabilities to work in a network and create coalitions with the purpose of having an influence on the governments in the effective development of policies to combat such phenomenon.

The Heads of State and Government of the Central American Integration System (SICA) agreed in Bosques de Zambrano, Honduras, on October 3rd. of the same year, to give instructions to the Ministries of Public Security, Governance or Justice and Children's Institutes to prepare a Regional Project for Technical Assistance for the Treatment of Minors at Social Risk or in Conflict with the Law. From that meeting to this date, we have complied with more than 23 mandates issued by such summit. Today, we are holding with the AID's and the European cooperation's support, through the Support Program for Central American Regional Integration, PAIRCA, with headquarters in the General Secretariat of SICA, the first meeting aimed at the fulfillment of the mandate of the referred Summit of Heads of State and Government for the purposes of sharing points of view that will help us lay the foundations of the regional project.

The information that we will share today concerning juvenile violence problems will be extremely useful and will help us attain a better understanding of the human aspect of the problem as well as the drama and urgency to solve the tragedy that takes place day after day, hour after hour. Furthermore, it will allow us to have an outlook that will help us identify short, medium and long term actions and alternatives for solution. A better understanding of this tragedy will contribute to support the justice strengthening programs and will reaffirm our commitment to work together with Governments and the Civil Society in order to succeed in our efforts to enjoy a society without violence, with effective and fair justice for everyone.

In the end, we know that we must overcome this tragedy through working together on different solutions that may facilitate its eradication with the assurance that the kindness of the human spirit has no limits and the future generations will reap the benefits of our efforts towards juvenile violence reduction not only in Central America but also in the rest of the world.

Ladies and gentleman,

Many of you have dedicated your lives to the struggle against poverty and violence and in favor of civil rights and justice, equality and fairness for all. This struggle has inevitably led you to fight against violence in its multiple dimensions and manifestations. We applaud your past and current efforts to reduce this scourge that conspires against the efforts of our citizens for a life in peace, liberty and democracy.

Your individual and collective commitments to support new programs against violence will help us guarantee a better quality of life for all the Central American citizens. This is a sacred responsibility, particularly, taking into account that finding a solution to the juvenile violence problems is not an easy task and such problem goes beyond the borders and affects all our nations.

The consequences of juvenile violence are well-known and documented, and comprise underdevelopment, the creation of an inadequate climate for national and international investments, generation of lack of trust in the government systems; consequently, juvenile violence becomes a threat to democracy and governance.

The reality is that in our countries many underage children are responsible for committing crimes and citizens currently live in insecurity conditions. In the last years, this type of violence has become one of the major serious social problems in Central America and this is the reason why we are trying to find regional solutions.

According to studies carried out by the Arias Foundation for Peace and Human Progress, juvenile violence is increasing; these youths are predominantly poor, urban, male, unemployed, between the ages of 13 and 29, and at higher risk because they are more vulnerable.

Groups of youths and adolescents involved in violent actions are still the reason for concern and alarm among our societies, making clear that this type of violence has exceeded the tolerable limits of social coexistence, posing a threat to the life and security of the people and their goods.

As a consequence of this phenomenon, the population demands that the States guarantee proper social order and strengthens the fight against criminal actions as well as security on the streets, homes, businesses, rural sector, transportation and workplaces. They insist on the need to control young delinquents. However, it seems that crime far from disappearing sometimes increases and that an exclusively repressive response is not the only solution.

Within this context, the social control institutions have stated their difficulties in dealing with the situation and the old socialization channels such as the family, school and work have lost their effectiveness.

On the other hand, the social conflicts that the youths are provoking are revealing the weaknesses of the State institutions to control the problem and the need to strengthen them. It forces us to work even harder on crime prevention tasks.

The social reality and scientific research show that violence and juvenile delinquency are a complex problem where a great number of factors relating to economic, social, juridical, political, cultural and psychological conditions and processes converge and that it is very difficult to deal with if we separate them from the macro structural processes such as urban expansion, unemployment, poverty and their effect on the traditional socialization channels, among others.

Dear friends,

Juvenile violence is a pernicious phenomenon and is experienced everyday in many of our countries. It erodes the quality of our lives and deprives us from the possibility of a better tomorrow. This situation frustrates our citizens, not because democracy has failed as a government system but because the methods to fight violence are not sufficiently effective sometimes.

This promise involves equal opportunities to achieve a better life, the preservation of the individual and collective political and civil freedoms and economic growth that increases the number of jobs and reduces poverty. The type of democracy that our citizens desire, is that which improves the quality of life not only for just a few, but for everyone; and we are working very hard on this.

Initiatives such as the one that brings us together today will give us the opportunity to work for a new and promising chapter of the Central American history, one where courage will defeat cruelty and light will conquer

darkness. This vocation is worth of our people. So, let's continue with confidence, determination and without fear, facing together the present dangers and accepting the promise of a better tomorrow.

To conclude, I would like to congratulate you for your concern and humanitarian spirit, for sharing with us today. Let us join efforts to keep this spirit alive for the good of our youths and people, for our self-respect as citizens of a Central America that deserves the best.

Thank you for your support. You can rest assured that we will continue cooperating as friends and partners.

Thank you.