

Speech by the Secretary General of SICA, Ambassador Aníbal Quiñónez, on the occasion of the Decoration Ceremony as a Great Officer of the Order "Francisco Morazán"

Honorable Members of the Parliament:

The Order bestowed upon me today by the Central American Parliament is both a distinction and an encouraging message. It is an honor, not for my personal achievements whichever they may be, but for my delicate and difficult position as Secretary General of the Central American Integration System. It is also an incentive because it carries the obligation to work resolutely to meet the demands of the process, which was in the past and is today the permanent aspiration of our societies.

When the honorable representatives of Central America and the Dominican Republic gathered in plenary session determined to grant this decoration, perhaps they were not thinking of me as an individual but of all the officers and employees of the bodies and institutions of the System, who, amidst the recurrent crises of our Integration, have remained faithful to the unfinished project for an integrated region. For this reason, Roberto Herrera Cáceres, the late Ernesto Leal, Mauricio Herdocia and Oscar Santamaría, my predecessors in the Secretariat, who in due time accomplished the mission demanded by the status of the integration, also receive this award with me.

Today, at this moment, things have changed. The Central America of the 20th Century is not the same as the one of the 21st Century. It is important to keep this in mind because the changes have affected not only the internal situation of the countries but also the Integration System itself.

We are living through times of trade openness. In a few years, we have signed and implemented free trade agreements with a good number of States based on bilateral negotiations. The consequences of this way of doing things have an effect on the regional tariffs and separate the relationships of competition in our countries. This trade liberalization has not been fully understood since several positions have been adopted throughout the region with regard to these agreements.

I think that this debate should also be taken to the Central American Parliament not only to define positions but also to look for complementary formulas or agendas that will offset the imbalance of the undeniable asymmetry between the parties, and at the same time, to encourage investment in goods and services. What would be missing is that the agenda, based on the joint policies adjusted to the Customs Union, include regional measures in the field of energy, infrastructure, labor qualification, new financial instruments, and in general, in all the fields or sectors that characterize the new economy with its high degree of competitiveness.

Another element that portrays the current status of the integration process is the proximity of the Customs Union. Measures towards this end have been taken for some time in fulfillment of the Guatemala Protocol and the determination of the member States. We have defined this Union as the threshold of a community organization for real integration beyond the intergovernmental conditioning of the process. Governments have invested time to define the juridical pact that must guarantee the good operation of the Customs Union and is about to reach an agreement in the next coming days. The dilemma between a community organization or an intergovernmental entity that manage the Union will be resolved in the days to come according to the political will prevailing in the negotiations.

We believe that it is very important to know Parliament's vision of this issue because I do not have any doubt that its point of view will have significant influence on the final decision. On the other hand, we are about to start negotiations for a Partnership Agreement with the European Union. It is a region-to-region relationship that opens unprecedented perspectives in the fields of policies, cooperation and free trade. Therefore, it is important to urge the regional institutions to consider these matters because in one way or another, all our work programs will be affected and we will face new situations that will require efforts different from those made in the past decades. The Central American Parliament, as the permanent and democratic political entity that represents the Central American society, has a lot to contribute to a climate for successful negotiations with the European Union.

Issues such as the asymmetry of the two regions, access to social cohesion funds, external cooperation harmonization, identification of development projects with high impact on the region and their sustainability for increased social benefit, will be included in the institutional agenda of the System.

We must not forget, however, that the economy and its infrastructure, with all its energy and importance, does not exhaust and must not exhaust the integration agenda, not only considering the failed federal unity but also because the elimination of the political barriers that separate us today with their inevitable social sequels and all kinds of consequences, is a necessary step to reassure our identity before the world, open promising spaces for development, and facilitate the investment at a technical and financially acceptable and convenient level.

In this order of ideas, the members of the Central American Parliament have a clear view of their role in the process: "Efficient and democratic leadership among the different regional actors that, within the framework of sustainable development, contributes to gradual and progressive achievement of the Central American Union, building a modern, fair and supportive society that guarantees peace and respect for human rights".

Honorable Members of the Parliament:

This approach takes on special significance today. The tendency of the actions leads us to a world economy where the countries organized in groups of regional integration projects will be the main actors of the international activities. The tighter the ties between the national units the higher their impact and benefit on their relationships with third States or regions. This occurs now with tourism, natural disaster prevention, technology development and procurement, fight against corruption and other manifestations of delinquency, among other sectors.

The General Secretariat puts at the disposal of the Parliament the necessary support to plan a joint action in relation to these issues and propose an action plan to our heads of state and government to strengthen and improve our integration. I must not omit that, to this end it is necessary, among other important things, to expand the scope of action of PARLACEN.

Honorable Members of the Parliament:

You can rest assured that I will honor this decoration as a GREAT OFFICER OF THE ORDER OF THE CENTRAL AMERICAN PARLIAMENT "FRANCISCO MORAZAN", diligently fulfilling the duties

of a Central American worthy of carrying on this award the name of the great paladin; that I will keep it as an offering of solidarity among the partners of the unionist cause, and that will pass it on to the future Central American generations as proof of our existing love for Central America and that its greatness is the most sacred duty of the sons of this generous land.

Thank you.