

**The President of Venezuela Hugo Chávez Remarks
at the Opening Dinner of the
"Challenges to Democracy" Conference**

Let me put the watch over here... [*Laughter and applause*]

The truth is I've just slid in here. I want to thank our great friend President Carter and the whole Carter Center team for this invitation. It is an old invitation, more than three years old. We hadn't been able to come to Atlanta before now. But, God was willing that today, a trip we had to make to Houston and Lake Charles, coincided with this event, and we were able to step up the pace a little bit and we made it, although a bit embarrassed at only having arrived just now. But the plane could not fly any faster.

And I am happy to be here with so many great friends. I haven't even had the chance to see all of you, and now with these lights, my desire to look at the face of each one of you has been stymied. But to be here with my brother and friend, the former Dominican President Leonel Fernández gives me great happiness, immense joy, as does seeing Enrique García, President of the Andean Corporation for Development, Jennifer McCoy, a friend for several years, and hearing the final part of Porfirio's moving presentation, which was so clear. And to be with all of you, brothers and sisters.

The subject is democracy in the Americas.

A few days ago a journalist visited Venezuela and she asked to interview me. And we were in Paria province, in the eastern part of Venezuela, inaugurating a road that we built this year, overcoming many difficulties, and which it seems had been promised by Christopher Columbus himself 500 years ago when he arrived in Amacuro. There had been no road to that town. And finally we built one, and we inaugurated that road. And I invited this excellent journalist to accompany me on the trip.

She was asking me, while I was driving an all-terrain vehicle, already close to Amacuro, she was asking me, how could I talk about democracy, since I had led a military coup against democracy.

That is a question that comes up time and again in various parts of the world. Of course, I don't have any difficulty responding to that question, it doesn't pin me to the wall at all. Because the truth is, and I feel this very deeply, in Venezuela for some years democracy had been lost. There was no democracy. It was a farce.

Democracy can degenerate. I believe it was Montesquieu who said that democracy could degenerate, as many things degenerate and with the best of intentions you arrive at the gates of hell. In Venezuela there was a political process, undoubtedly carried out in good faith, but it was a democracy that fell short. And it was overwhelmed by a tragedy and degenerated into a real tyranny of the leading cliques, the most corrupt thing that has ever been seen in the history of this hemisphere. And as this process of moral and political corruption was taking place, this process of political delegitimization and social degeneration, you had some soldiers, who had been trained to be soldiers for democracy, because we were educated to be soldiers for democracy. And at a given point the situation exploded. Because the system had lost the capacity to correct itself. Veritable mafias, the so-called judicial tribes, had kidnaped the courts. There was horrible, frightening impunity. Poverty was growing. And so that exploded into a popular rebellion, which many researchers had warned about, many observers of the evolution of Venezuela, who warned, "beware of the day of the woods," which is a warning bell we have in Venezuela. "On that day the poor will rise up."

It was a popular rebellion and then we soldiers for democracy were ordered to stop the poor at all costs. And an allegedly democratic president sent thousands of soldiers with rifles and machine guns and tanks to destroy a beaten down, hungry and unarmed population.

I saw with these eyes children who had been shot with rifle bullets. Not from the rifles of an invading army, but of their own army, and moreover, an army that has on its banner nothing less than the name of the Liberator, Simón Bolívar. An army which had been forged in the battle for freedom, an army that believes Bolívar's words when he said, "damned be the soldier that turns his weapons against his own people." And damned we were.

Something was going to happen in Venezuela. That road could even have led us to a civil war with horrible consequences. Fortunately, thanks be to God, we did not go that far. Instead we got what has happened, and what is happening.

I am going to make a great effort to be brief, something that is difficult for me, as you know [*laughter*]. Yes, Jimmy was saying --I can call you Jimmy, right? You can call me Hugo with no problem [*laughter*]. With all my respect for your years and your experience, I have always admired you. And I told you so the day we met, when I was a tender youth. You invited me to see a Baseball game, and you still owe me. But it is very worthwhile to be here instead of at the stadium. Moreover, there are no more games in the stadium, and I'm rooting for the Yankees now. Forgive me.

If I didn't get muddled up on the plane on the way here, where I was going over some notes, it was some 163 years ago that Abraham Lincoln said those words that we all know: "government of the people, by the people, for the people."

I think that needs to be reconquered. I believe Lincoln's words continue to have tremendous meaning in the search for the ways of justice, of equality and of happiness.

Bolívar had also said, years before, on the banks of the Orinoco River, in Angostura, we want a democratic and republican system of government. And I thought it would be good to use both terms, since we are in the final stretch of the election campaign, and not speak just of republicans or of democrats, thereby possibly creating confusion. Republican and democratic, that's what Bolívar said. And he was defining a system of government, which he called the most perfect one. And he said it had to be the most perfect so that it could give political stability, social security and the greatest possible happiness to the people. It is very similar to Lincoln's speech.

A government of the people. A government that belongs to the people just as one might say, these hands are my hands. That's the way the government should be. The people should say, this is my government. It belongs to the people. It is of the people also in another sense, it should come from the people, have its origins in the popular will.

But that isn't enough, and Lincoln was very clear about it. It isn't enough for a government to be of the people for it to be democratic. It isn't enough that the government be elected by the majority for it to be democratic. No, the full-fledged Bolivarian or Lincolnian democracy adds another condition. Government by the people. That is, what Lincoln was saying, we can see this clearly, is that a government should express itself through popular channels, that it should be participatory, as Porfirio was saying. More than representative, and in addition to being representative, it should be participatory. A government by the people, as if it were the blood that runs through my veins. It must run through the veins of the people. There must be broad participation in

the government if it is to be democratic. We're dealing here with the process, there must be broad participation for it to be democratic.

But you have to go even further. Lincoln was very demanding, as a true democrat. For him it wasn't enough that it be of the people, that its origins lie in public opinion and its expression, it isn't enough that it flow like blood through the veins, through the people's channels, one must go further. What are its objectives? What is it that guides it? What are its goals, what are its results? And from this, the phrase "for the people." You, too, were saying it, brother.

A democratic government must bring happiness to its people, Bolívar said, to use his words. It must give the people justice, equality, opportunities, participation, and a standard of living. How could you call some governments a democracy?

Take the Venezuelan case, for example. A country with a land mass of nearly one million square kilometers, much more if you include the territorial waters, with one of the world's largest crude oil reserves, which we have been exploiting for almost a century. A country with the Caribbean Sea at its doorstep. A country with immense mineral riches of gold, aluminum, iron, great rivers such as the Orinoco, millions of acres in fertile lands, fresh water, number ten in the world in fresh water, etc.

And what had been the result after four decades of alleged democracy? Of every 100 Venezuelans, 80 were living in poverty. Is that democracy? Is that what democracy is for? And that's where the danger arises that the people will say, "no, what do I need democracy for? So that I can starve to death?"

I believe this meditation on Lincoln's words is very appropriate for this seminar which the Carter center has happily organized to debate these ideas, since we are entering a new millennium.

I believe it is a challenge for the entire hemisphere, but especially for the peoples of Latin America and the Caribbean, to rescue that meaning of democracy: of the people, by the people, for the people.

The Venezuelan case. A second idea I want to offer for people to think about.

Fortunately, we found a peaceful way out of what was a vicious circle, to escape from a trap. For the last 40 years, representative democracy in Venezuela had become a trap, and in addition to that, an explosive trap, an extremely dangerous one. There was no way out; it was a vicious circle.

After those events, which were undesirable, needless to say, fortunately the violent events which shook the country were limited, taking place from 1988, 1989 until 1992.

Fortunately after that we found a peaceful road towards deep going changes, structural changes in all aspects. And that is where what President Carter said in Caracas a few hours after the electoral triumph of December 6, 1998, at a press conference, comes in. It is an idea that the people of Venezuela have taken on as their own, an idea that has taken root in Venezuela.

They asked President Carter something like, "What do you think of the process you have been observing?" And he answered, "I've seen a democratic revolution." And in truth, that is our process, that is the essence of our process. There was no way to escape from the trap with the mere mechanisms of representative democracy. We would have continued sinking into a frightful abyss.

So we had to have a constituent process. We had to give the voice and the power to make decisions to the nation collectively. And to tell the truth, when I accepted the nomination for the presidency, after having come out from prison and having spent several years going around the country organizing a political movement, giving it an ideological direction, strengthening a new structure, a new movement, we did so conscious that we were going to call a Constituent Assembly, and we said so. I said so many times. We are going into an election campaign and we are going to win it because we are going to call a national referendum.

Nothing like this had ever happened in Venezuela. The already constituted bodies always monopolized decisions, but there was no way to do anything with those, they were totally worn out. There was no way out through them. I'm talking about the existing governmental bodies of Venezuela. I am sure that in Mexico they will be able to achieve it, and we respect Mexico deeply, and pray to God for Mexico and its future. We are sure it is in good hands, and we are willing to support it with all our efforts, our good will and our respect. And most of all respect for the sovereignty of Mexico and of its people, its state and its government.

But Venezuelan reality was different. In Venezuela the ruling political sectors for 20 years had been talking about constitutional changes which never came. They even created a ministry. There was a presidential commission with cabinet rank called the Presidential Commission for Reforming the State. Nothing came of it. And they never made even the slightest change. There was no will, no capacity, and I repeat, the situation was very dangerous.

Well, as President Carter said with his words, many people had doubts about this road. I, too, had doubts. I had lots of doubts. There is nothing sure when you set out on a path towards the future. The challenge is to come up with a plan, a project, and make it viable. But when what is involved is the fate of the country, when what is involved is looking for a road forward, we must listen to what Bolívar said: throw our fear behind us in order to save the country.

Thus, without even one second's hesitation, the first government action I took upon arriving at the presidential palace on February 2, 1999, was to sign a presidential decree calling a national referendum. My friends, I repeat that this had never been done in Venezuela.

The constituted powers resisted. Some 25 challenges to the decree were filed before the Supreme Court. But the Court, of course, ruled in favor of the decree and of the appeal to the sovereignty of the people. And that is how the country went through seven electoral processes in a year and a half. Seven elections. And I'll confess that by the end of this I was a little bit tired of so much electoral campaigning. But the truth is one can never tire when what is involved is moving the country forward through democratic means, means which are of the people, which come from the popular will. And with absolutely clear, pure methods.

In the referendum, ninety-some percent of the population said yes, the president should call together a Constituent Assembly. In addition, it was an assembly, which was given a supra-constitutional character, and this frightened many people. It also gave me chills sometimes.

Look how far we've come in Venezuela. We elected an assembly of 160 ladies and gentlemen, with supra-constitutional powers. That is, they were not bound by the constitution of 1961. This was a very dangerous bridge. But public opinion and the people supported the process. And there was coexistence between the assembly elected on June 25, 1999, and the Congress of the old regime. At times there was great tension,

which fortunately did not go lead to more than heated words. We even had a situation that at the national legislative palace, on the right wing of the building we had the old Congress, with the old faces, who were shouting “tyrant” and “dictator,” but in the left wing of the building, the Constituent Assembly was meeting and there the people were saying, “revolution.”

And, of course, the Constituent Assembly won out. In four months a constitution was drafted before the whole country. This Constitution was not drafted as had always been done in the past in Venezuela, with Congress locked up in a legislative palace to which the people had no access. In Venezuela, even the native peoples came down from the mountain to make proposals. What’s more, they elected their own representatives to the assembly. Three representatives were elected, not by the electoral council; they elected them in the mountains with their own traditional methods. And they showed up with their bows and arrows and feathers at the assembly, and they came in their traditional dress with their drums to dance for their Gods before the legislative body. And the Blacks from Barlovento, the women who had organized, the evangelical Christians, and the Catholics. We even had deep religious discussions in the assembly. The Catholic Church took part in the debate. A group of women were asking for the right to abortion, but the Church responded that this was a sin.

You can imagine the debates we had. It was extraordinary, and educational. Homosexuals wanted the right to marry freely. Children held their own constituent assembly in which my wife, María Isabel, participated, helping them and motivating them. The children were saying, we too are subjects, we don’t want others to think for us, we also want to speak and to put forth our opinions.

So it was a democratic process. It was an open process.

Through a variety of channels thousands of proposals for the drafting of the new constitution made their way to the Constituent Assembly, and it was drawn up despite all sorts of problems and disruptions in Venezuela and throughout the world.

And it was presented in a referendum. We wanted to do it that way, although it had never been done that way in Venezuela. The Constitutions were drafted by the Congress and approved by the Congress. We went to ask the people in a second referendum on December 15, and asked, do you approve of the new constitution drafted by the Constituent Assembly, yes or no?

More than 90% said yes. But there was an open campaign for a no vote. A lot of people came out for voting no. People with a lot of strength and the ability to make themselves heard through the media.

That’s something else. There was complete freedom of speech. Absolute freedom of the press, with only one small exception. During the electoral process, one radio and television program was suspended by order of the Electoral Council. But as it turns out President Chávez hosted that program. Yes, they decided that this program which I had been doing since becoming president was not appropriate, and they suspended it, and I accepted the suspension of the program.

All political, social, religious and cultural currents participated in this debate. And the constitution was ratified in a referendum on December 15, 1999. And so we entered a transitional stage.

And then we began a process of the re-legitimization of the organs of government. I started it by telling the country, I place my position in your hands. And we went to a new election campaign to re-legitimize the mandates under the new constitution. And that is

how we came to July 30, and a new election in which the people once again entrusted their confidence to me, relegitimized me, and with more votes, nearly 300 thousand more, than in December of 1998. And where we elected once again all the governors, and the members of the National Assembly, all the mayors of the country were elected once again.

And now the process is continuing, creating the new democratic institutions. A citizen's branch of government, an electoral branch, and a judicial branch, a new judicial branch. We have a new Supreme Court, democratically elected.

And that is the road we were able to achieve, pushed forward by the power of the people, pushed forward by an ideology, Bolivar's ideology, pushed forward by a profoundly democratic spirit.

Now, to finish up, and trying to keep my promise, after the theoretical framework I outlined above based on Abraham Lincoln's words, that democracy is government of the people, by the people and for the people, and after that brief review of the Venezuelan experience, which fortunately has brought us now to a nascent democracy, I want to finish with the following idea.

In Venezuela, we are very far from saying that we have consolidated democracy. It is a newborn baby, one who is just being born. Now this democratic system needs to be fed, it needs to grow, nurtured by the love of the people, the respect of the people. And above all the people should begin to feel that this system is one that has been born from it, from its own hands, its own efforts, that it works by the transmission belts of participation. Because in Venezuela we have started a process of participation. The people should begin to feel that the process is for its happiness, for its benefit. And so what is involved is human rights, social justice, a social and economic system that benefits the majority, that gradually eliminates the savage system of income distribution that exists in Venezuela, that progressively eliminates the great difference that exists between a minority that has everything and a huge majority that has virtually nothing except hope. It is a tremendous challenge, which we have before us: how to make the economy serve the needs of human beings. How to create a good educational system for all.

Just one example. In just one year, we have managed to rescue from the streets, from the danger of delinquency, of drug trafficking, one million children who were outside the school system because their parents could not pay the tuition. Because even public schools charged tuition in Venezuela. They didn't even have enough to eat, how could they study? How could they do to school? One million children. And I beg you to take into account that Venezuela's population is 22 million people, so that is a very high percentage. So it was savagery turned into a system of government and moreover, wrongly called a democratic system.

A social democracy, an economic democracy, the creation of jobs, equality of opportunity, social and economic justice, these are the tremendous challenges before us in the future. If we were not to achieve it, admitting a possibility we deny –which is by the way a phrase we use over there and we repeat a lot, it was said by a general in Venezuela's war for freedom, who once, when facing an enemy army, told his troops, who were few in number but great in their morale, and he told them, we cannot choose between victory or death. Victory is necessary. And that is what we say. We cannot choose between victory and failure. We must have victory, for the good and the peace of Venezuela.

So if we were not to achieve it, admitting as a possibility something which we deny, if the Venezuelan people, which is today, needless to say, still sunk in poverty, but which has great hopes, if the people did not see, as the months and years go by, that they are

getting results from this system which they made with their own hands, with their own efforts, they would slowly lose confidence in it. The system would lose legitimacy and we could once again face the abyss. That is why we are not allowed to fail, that's what we say.

So I bring this thought to wind up saying that the truth is that representative democracy has failed in Latin America. I believe representative democracy is necessary, as is hydrogen in water. But to make water hydrogen is not enough. It is only necessary.

I believe that the leaders that are coming up in this new millennium face a great challenge in Latin America, marked as it is by misery, inequality, poverty, unemployment, injustice. We must build new democratic models. Models which are representative and participatory. In Venezuela we have been more audacious, and we have put in the new Bolivarian Constitution an even more advanced aspiration: We want to build a representative, participatory, and protagonist democracy. And what we are doing is making our own Lincoln's statement: government of the people, by the people, for the people.

If these thoughts could help even if only in the smallest degree to stimulate your own thinking, you, men and women who have great experience in politics, in political analysis and public policy leadership in our hemisphere, in this new world, then it will have been well worthwhile to have come sliding in here, and it will have been well worth while having missed the New York Yankees game.

Thank you very much, my dear friends. [*Applause*]

Questions and answers:

Q. Good evening. I'm Elías Santana, of the Venezuelan Association Queremos Elegir. President, it is a pleasure to greet you.

Chavez: How are you, Elías. How is it going?

Q. It may seem paradoxical that a Venezuelan citizen would travel to Atlanta to talk with his president. The civil association, which I represent, Queremos Elegir, is still waiting to be granted its right to reply to the inexact and harmful information that our president expressed in the program, to the presidents, on Sunday, August 27. But that is a decision, as you know, Mr. President, for the Supreme Court. We have gone to the Supreme Court for it to decide whether the Constitution of the republic is in effect, and whether we will be granted what is provided for in Article 14 of the Interamerican Convention on Human Rights and in Article 58 of the new Venezuelan Constitution.

But speaking of the Supreme Court of Justice, and of the cliques which you mentioned, something is going to happen tomorrow in our country. The parliament, the National Assembly, the majority of the parliamentarians represented there, are going to approve in its first reading a law which violates the judicial order. It violates the constitution, which you were the leader of, and which we Venezuelans recognize and we want to say that as you know, we collaborated in that process.

I want to tell the audience that in 1992, a few weeks after the president attempted his coup d'état, we were proposing a Constituent Assembly in the midst of the suspension of constitutional guarantees.

And at this moment, this parliamentary majority that is in the National Assembly is getting ready to violate the judicial order. The participatory and protagonist democracy of which you speak, and which we are vitally committed to, as you and I know, Mr.

President, for we have known each other for many years, is going to be violated because a law is going to be passed which will lead to 15 deputies deciding who will be on the next Supreme Court in our country for the next 12 years.

They will decide who will be the next attorney general, the next comptroller, and the next public defender. And we want to be able to count on you as President to oppose this violation of the Constitution. You know we are willing to do anything, to go to the extreme of civil disobedience for Article 333 and Article 350. You proposed those two articles of the Constitution in your draft. And I believe that if the deputies of the pro government majority violate the Constitution, the citizens of Venezuela will have to take up civil disobedience.

The question for the president is this: what is the opinion of the president of Venezuela about the violation of the Constitution, which you promoted, that is about to take place tomorrow in the Congress of our Republic?

Chávez: Well, let me start by saying that it is a pleasure to see you, and I'm also very pleased that all of you here in Atlanta can be witnesses to Venezuela's internal debate. This debate chases me wherever I go. The other day I was in Beijing, and the debate had also made it over there, that is how intense freedom of expression is in Venezuela, that it even makes it all the way to here, to Atlanta. And it is a debate of historical importance, because it is the end of one process and the beginning of another one.

The countryman who spoke belongs to a political group that participated freely in the elections and even has a group of deputies who lead a political life. Now, he's said various things. I'm forced to explain certain things, since this is an audience that doesn't know our process from the inside, that doesn't know the context.

On the first of the subjects he touched on, the right to reply. Yes, it exists, and we applaud it and have even made use of it on some occasions when certain information has been presented that goes beyond criticism, because criticism is a two-way street.

Well, as you said, you've gone to the Supreme Court, and the Supreme Court will issue a ruling, probably in the next few days.

Where does this come from? I have a weekly radio program every Sunday, sometimes it is five hours long. People call in; I explain my activities to the country, the decisions that have been made, but above all it is so that people can call in and raise their problems, which are diverse. We take note of the problems and try to find solutions for them. And people give their opinions. This is something without precedent in Venezuela.

On one occasion, the organization that Mr. Santana represents, making use of the term "civil society," said they were going to call for civil disobedience because some proposal of theirs had not been adopted by the recently elected government bodies. And I answered, saying what I believe. I told him that civil society wasn't just one or two groups. That the indigenous peoples of the Amazons are civil society, that the workers in the factories are civil society. That we are all civil society. Because he threatened to call for civil disobedience, challenging the establishment. And I believe this kind of talk is dangerous at this time. This is a moment of transition, a difficult moment. And he was calling for disobedience on the basis of the analysis that he has. Well, I answered him, it is as simple as that.

They believe they should have the right to reply, and requested this from the radio station that carries my program. We analyzed the situation and the law and decided that this wasn't right. Because if I were to ask for the right to reply, I would be on the radio and television every day. Under the law, the right to reply, as we understand it, and there are

lawyers here who can explain it, is a right a person has when some information has come out that they find offensive, and believe to be mistaken.

For example, suppose a newspaper says, Hugo Chávez robbed a bank yesterday. That is a report that affects me. And so I say, I demand the right to reply: that is a lie. But when it is a question of political opinions, every day there are contrasting opinions and a clash of opinions. You say yes, and I say no. So the replies come out every day in the media. That is one opinion.

At any rate, as you pointed out, the Supreme Court will make a decision, and what that shows is that there is a system of separation of powers in Venezuela.

The other point you made, which wasn't a question but rather your take on the situation, is that the Constitution is going to be violated. Things really are not the way you present them. That is the opinion of sectors of the opposition.

We are still in the middle of a transition, as I was saying. There are five branches of the government. The executive was relegitimized, because we put it before the people. The president, the governors, the mayors. The legislative branch was relegitimized. The Constituent Assembly disappeared, and the people elected a new National Assembly. However, the judicial branch, the electoral branch, and the citizens' branch are still transitional. They have to be relegitimized. They must be elected.

The National Assembly has elected or is about to elect a commission of deputies, because, under the Constitution, the Assembly has the responsibility of electing the members of those branches, through a procedure established in the Constitution. But there still is no law, this is a transition, and that is what you have not wanted to understand. Jurists and political analysts have explained it. The Constitution assumes there will be a law, for example, for the judicial branch. Because of the transition, there is no law right now. How is the new judicial branch to be elected? There is no law, the National Assembly has to draw one up. So what the Assembly is proposing is to take a step towards the complete, full relegitimization, by electing those bodies and then drafting a law, which given the way the legislative process works, could take up to a year or more. Then, when the new laws are approved by the Assembly, then would come the definitive relegitimization of organs which are, simply, transitional, and which emerged from the decision of the supra-Constitutional Constituent Assembly, which itself emerged from the sovereign decision of the people.

This is a democratic process and a transition. That's how I respond to your statement, and I thank you.

Q. [The speaker was identified by the chair as Robert Pastor.] Mr. President, 10 years ago the majority of the countries of the Americas did not permit international observers to monitor their elections, saying that this constituted an intervention in their internal affairs. Many of the leaders here from Nicaragua broke that precedent in 1990. And since then most of the countries in this hemisphere have invited observers to monitor their elections, including the seven elections that you've held, with the involvement of the Carter Center and others.

Next April, the Third Summit of the Americas will be held in Quebec City. And we have discussed ways in which the hemisphere could strengthen democracy, and re-enforce democratic trends. And build on the precedents that were set in Santiago in 1991, and the amendment to the charter of the OAS itself, which would suspend countries that interrupted the democratic process.

My question is, what steps do you think the hemisphere should take to re-enforce democracy among its members. Should all of the countries, for example, invite international observers that would have complete and unrestricted access to the entire election? And what steps should the hemisphere take if countries break with that tradition?

Chávez: I believe international observers are necessary and very useful in reinforcing and giving greater guarantees of the transparency of elections. But since you ask me, what should be done in terms of the guarantee of democracy, I think it would be necessary to go way beyond observing for a day, or for a few days, or for a week.

For example, let me return to the Venezuelan case. Sometimes I ask myself: didn't observers from other parts of the world or the Americas realize what was going on in Venezuela 30, 20 or 10 years ago? Why were those elections not closely watched? On the contrary, there would be applause every time an election was held, and it was said that this was the guarantee of democracy. But I believe one has to go much deeper.

My exposition on those three ideas expressed by Lincoln, that there be a real, substantive democracy, with social, ethical and economic content, means that much more than observation is required. A group of observers is invited in good faith by the institutions, and with the best disposition it goes to the country, as the Carter Center has done. This helps a great deal, especially in making clear to the whole world that the elections have been clean. But, I repeat, it is necessary to go deeper, much deeper.

For example, and let me answer your very interesting question with an example. Because you are asking me what should be done, in my opinion, if there is not a clean process, in the opinion of some international delegates.

We have the recent case of Peru.

There was an internal process in Peru, a difficult one, and the observers came with a report. A proposal was placed before the OAS to condemn Peru, or to demand that Peru repeat the elections, or that some sanction be imposed. And we opposed that. Not just for Peru, but out of respect for the internal character of all such processes. Because it is one thing for a commission to observe, to present a report. And it is another thing for sanctions to be proposed against a country. Each country should have its own institutions, its own mechanisms. So I don't believe we should go to such extremes. It is one thing to call attention to what has happened, to create pressure.

Later the OAS went to Peru, calling for a dialogue, and that seems right to me. Point out some problems in the process, ask for understanding, to continue with the process. But to say as the conclusion that this process had certain faults, and therefore we request a condemnation, I don't believe we should go that far.

In another case, a conflict emerged at the beginning of the year in Ecuador. We are full of respect for our brothers in Ecuador, we support all our colleague, friend and brother governments of the hemisphere. But I was in the loneliness of my office one evening when I saw the images broadcast by international television on what was going on in Ecuador. And I had already heard—we had heard, Leonel, you must remember it also—the anguished words of our friend Jamil Mahuad, in Santo Domingo, then in Cartagena, and the last time I saw him was in Havana. He was saying he couldn't stand the situation any more. The foreign debt, payments on the foreign debt, were gobbling up more than half of the budget. Poverty, a sort of abyss, a political crisis, a breakdown in governability, as you were talking about, Porfirio, a complete breakdown in governability. And we asked ourselves, what can we do to help Ecuador? We all have our dramas and our tragedies, but that situation was explosive. Until a day came when I don't

know how many thousands of Indians took the capital. And then the soldiers were told to halt the Indian masses. And then a group of officers said they were joining with the Indians.

After that, we were asked to join in condemning that. I was asked to condemn it. And I said, no, I cannot condemn that, and Venezuela did not join in the statement condemning the coup in Ecuador. And I said, that doesn't look like a coup to me, that's something else, be careful, let's look at it deeply. Why don't we have a meeting and analyze things, the presidents and the institutions, and not do things over the phone, saying, "Are you watching the television? Let's condemn that."

No, no, no. Who am I to condemn a people that is searching for a way out? Let us ask for God's help, let's state our support for peace, for democracy, for understanding, yes, as we have done and continue to do.

So I don't think we should go around adopting condemnations, we'd all have to be condemned, I would be condemned and you would be condemned. We all have our burdens. That's how I respond to the thoughts you raise.

Although I truly believe that this moment in Latin America is not only a moment for reflection, it is a moment for action.

A short while ago we were in La Paz, invited by President Banzer, and we saw a beautiful process of dialogue, of national dialogue. We even participated in some meeting. There were indigenous leaders, workers leaders, the women, the peasants, the youth, students, in a dialogue with the government looking for solutions.

A few weeks ago there was once again a crisis in Bolivia. There was great tension, I believe there were even some casualties, even some deaths, because the coca-growing peasants from the high lands has seized the highways.

Why did they seize the highways? Because there is a plan to eradicate coca growing. And I asked my friend Banzer, well, you are going to eliminate Coca. And what are those peasants going to grow? They have been living from that for thousands or hundreds of years, there has to be a substitute crop, they have to have financing. And they are in that process, but they do not have sufficient resources. Some 96% of Bolivia's roads are still dirt roads. They do not have asphalt, nor an outlet to the sea, because in a war they lost the bit of coastline that they had.

So I think reflection should lead us to quick action. And I hope that next year's meeting in Quebec can serve to push forward that action, of a new continental leadership for a real and deep democracy, instead of spending our time condemning each other. [*applause*]