SPECIAL FEATURE

HEALTH FOR PEACE IN CENTRAL AMERICA

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Cervantes once wrote that the world could not survive divided between the haves and the have-nots. In that way, one of our greatest writers and philosophers set forth the historic challenge of modern development. I raise this question of equity at the outset, because, as the initial declaration creating the Contadora group asserts, a century-old failure to achieve justice has been a fundamental cause of the crisis in Central America.

There is now renewed hope for peace in the world; the horror of a nuclear holocaust and the extinction of mankind seem less than inevitable. Civilization need not end in an Armageddon of our species. A different world can be built with justice and in peace, and mankind has the means to build it, if only part of the resources expended in the arms race is diverted to the eradication of poverty and the building of more just societies in peace and liberty. The construction of that new world at peace requires a spirit of solidarity on behalf of man—of all men, of human life—as the highest value of social and international comity. There must be solidarity within each country and society, and between countries. This cannot be left to the most powerful countries alone; it must be a commitment made by all, the poor and weak included. Erosion of humanistic values and lack of solidarity lie at the root of all conflict and pose a real danger, one perhaps more ominous for mankind than even the nuclear threat. In Central America we have a good opportunity to contribute to realization of the foregoing universal goals. Health is an appropriate theme and can become an excellent means to these goals—a bridge to solidarity, justice, and peace.

The history of the Central American countries over the past century, and all too much of this century, has been one of domination enjoyed by the elite and injustice endured by the people. Even before the current crisis erupted, two-thirds of the people of Central

1 From an address entitled "Contadora/Health for Peace in Central America and Panama" presented at a conference of Contadora governments that was held in Madrid, Spain, in November 1985.
America and Panama lived in extreme poverty. Land in most countries was owned by a small minority whose control over economic resources was reflected in a monopoly of political power. These global realities had their human consequences: Nearly half of the people were illiterate, 80% of the population was ill-housed, and two-thirds of the children under five were malnourished. For millions of “campesinos” and those on the margins of urban society, “life,” in Hobbes’ words, was “poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”

Then the current crisis staggered the region. Over the past several years, violence has left over a hundred thousand dead or wounded and has forced a million men, women, and children to flee their homes. Government attention and public anxiety have focused on conflicts within nations and between nations. And we have all become concerned with the existing threat that these conflicts may expand.

The political conflicts have not been the only troubles. The international economic crisis has devastated the region. Between 1980 and 1984, recession and inflation combined to produce negative economic growth in every country of the isthmus, with per capita income declines ranging from 15 to 60%. The seven countries’ foreign debt, under 3 billion dollars in 1978, mushroomed to 18 billion dollars in 1984. Today family income in the region has retreated to the levels of the latter 1960s, and in terms of progress the people of Central America have lost almost two decades.

The international community as a whole must respond to this crisis. If we fail to halt these economic and political tragedies now, they will threaten to undermine the future of an entire generation, and many more thousands of human beings will be counted among their victims. Nor can we afford to ignore the fact that even though this conflict is located in Central America, it could have tremendous repercussions beyond its borders. And so, for both these reasons, we hope that the European nations as well as all other nations of the world will respond to this crisis and contribute to its solution.

The Contadora nations have recognized both the short-term and long-term impact of these events. The Presidents of Colombia, Mexico, Panama, and Venezuela stated their belief in 1983 that resolving the political conflicts also required addressing the underlying social and economic ills. And they based their actions in part on the conviction that the traditional strength of regional collaboration and interaction could provide a foundation for political and economic recovery.

For there is a special history of cooperation in Central America. One hundred and fifty years ago, the newly independent countries of Central America joined a Federation that survived for nearly three decades. Its long-term champion, Francisco Morazán, was born in Honduras, governed the Federation in Guatemala, and finally served as President of El Salvador.
Two decades ago the memory of this integration was stirred by establishment of the Central American Common Market, which gave impetus to the region's economic and social development. The lessons of European cooperation, evidenced in the Council of Europe and the European Economic Community, were seen as a model for the future development of Central America. That concept of regional collaboration now has become a worthwhile example encouraging the Central American countries to undertake a plan designed to serve the "Priority Health Needs of Central America and Panama."

It is crucial to recognize that this plan's fundamental purpose is promoting health development and, through that enterprise, stimulating joint endeavors that might enhance the opportunity for peaceful development.

The choice of health as a vehicle to surmount the conflict stemmed from global acceptance of health as a basic human right. In this vein, the Contadora and Central American foreign ministers formally recognized health's unique potential for engendering international cooperation spanning ideologies, political hostilities, and national idiosyncrasies. They recognized that disease respects no border and that its control depends on international solidarity. They also noted that the Ministers of Health of Central America and Panama have met together for 30 consecutive years, and that health cooperation is surely the most resilient form of exchange among the governments of the region.

We must also recognize that the countries involved did themselves create the Central American health initiative. Their political will gave birth to this effort. Their professionals reached a consensus on the objectives and design of each project. Their leaders chose to make these subregional projects the centerpiece of the plan. And despite the violence, despite ideological differences, and despite economic hardship, they have struggled together for two years to maintain this regional endeavor.

Within the context of the plan, and facing a wide variety of health situations and conditions, the Ministers of Health agreed unanimously that highest priority should be given to the following population groups: refugees and displaced persons, mothers and children under five, and those on the fringes of the economic mainstream in each society.

They also concurred on seven matters that should receive priority. These are (1) strengthening the health services network, because coverage must be extended to those without care and the managerial capacity of the system as a whole must be improved; (2) human resource development, because without skilled professionals at all levels—from community health workers to public health planners—the most urgent needs cannot be met and the longer-term goals cannot be achieved; (3) food and nutrition; (4) essential drugs; (5) tropical disease control; (6) water and sanitation, these last four all being basic elements in the primary care strategy, because they are available only to a minority in most countries; and fi-
nally, (7) maternal and child health, with emphasis on activities related to child survival and adequate child development.

Key professionals from each of the countries worked together to define the strategies and activities to be implemented in each of these seven priority areas. They then formed intercountry teams dealing with each priority area to develop regional projects that could resolve critical problems through joint action. Finally, each country created its own task forces to define and develop national projects that complemented the regional efforts. Overall, it has been national commitments and national efforts that have permitted the plan to move from concept to reality.

Three general concepts of what the plan must do have guided its development. These are as follows:

- First, the plan must constitute the central core for overall health development efforts in each nation and in the subregion as a whole.
- Second, the plan must serve as an instrument for expanding national and subregional understanding of how to organize, implement, and evaluate health development projects.
- Third, the plan must provide a way of helping the countries to mobilize national resources, and if the impact of the current crisis on people’s health is to be reduced, mobilization of external resources is an essential complement to the national effort.

During the past two years, we have advanced in each of these directions. I should also like to emphasize that at each step of what has been a continuous process over the past two years, the work of promoting health in a collaborative manner and thereby encouraging understanding, solidarity, and peace has been endorsed by the national governments of the participating countries at the highest political levels. During this period, the goals and commitments have not changed; and there is evidence—in countless meetings of hundreds of health professionals in all of the countries of the region—of this initiative’s capacity to surmount those political obstacles that still persist.

The specific subregional and national projects originally undertaken were initially summarized and approved by the Ministers of Health. The plan itself was endorsed by the World Health Assembly, by PAHO’s Directing Council, by the Foreign Ministers of the Contadora countries, and by all of the Ministers of Planning of Central America and of Latin America as a whole. It has also attracted the attention of the Ministers of Health of the member countries of the Council of Europe.

I am pleased to note that health has been included as a priority area in the recently signed agreement of support by the European Economic Community and the countries of Central America. They, along with the many institutions and countries represented here today at the Contadora/Health for Peace Conference, have already indicated
a willingness to endorse the objectives of the plan and to translate that endorsement into financial and technical support for specific projects.

Also, His Holiness, Pope John Paul II, has stated: "The Church shares your desire to serve mankind, to raise the quality of life, and to eliminate or reduce the causes of death and sickness. Therefore, I urge the international community to respond to those needs and goals. It is God's will that the joint effort on behalf of the health of the people in those countries constitute a powerful tool for promoting peace, solidarity, and understanding among the peoples of Central America and Panama."

At this conference we stand at a crossroads, for together we have made a strong beginning. Now we have the potential for making a vigorous leap forward in development of the plan.

Gabriel García Márquez wrote that "races condemned to one hundred years of solitude did not have a second opportunity on earth." This conference, "Contadora/Health for Peace," and this plan offer an opportunity to avoid many other years of solitude for the people of Central America. Together, we can take advantage of this opportunity to act through health, in pursuit of justice and in the search for peace in Central America, with the ultimate goal of promoting understanding, justice, and peace throughout the world.