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Peace accord enabled Central America to turn page on bitter conflict, open new chapter of peace, development, says Secretary- General to New York Conference

Following are UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's remarks to the conference on "A Firm and Lasting Peace in Central America: The Pending Agenda 20 Years Later" in New York, 13 June:

It is a pleasure to join you today.

I would like to thank President Oscar Arias for inviting me to address this conference. President Arias was, of course, at the very core of the Esquipulas peace process.

I am delighted that former President Vinicio Cerezo Arévalo of Guatemala, another leader of the peace process, is also participating in this event.

Let me also extend my warm greetings to Alvaro de Soto, who, during his long and dedicated service to the United Nations, played a crucial role in peace efforts in Central America and elsewhere.

My thanks also go to the Arias Foundation and the Albert Schweitzer Institute at Quinnipiac University for making possible this timely event.

The Esquipulas II Accord, adopted 20 years ago, triggered a series of initiatives that enabled the region to turn the page on a long era of bitter armed conflicts. It helped to open a new chapter of peace and development.

We should all be proud of the results of our collective efforts -- the Governments and people of the region, the United Nations system, and the international community as a whole. Our collaboration over the years took many different forms. The United Nations Observer Group in Central America was deployed in five countries to verify an end to assistance to irregular and insurrectionist forces. The United Nations Observer Mission for the Verification of the Elections in Nicaragua observed Nicaragua's elections in 1990.

The United Nations Observer Mission in El Salvador monitored implementation of the peace accords in El Salvador, while the United Nations Verification Mission in Guatemala verified compliance with the multidimensional agreements reached in Guatemala.

Meanwhile, initiatives such as the multi-agency Development Programme for Displaced Persons, Refugees and Returnees provided direct support to those most affected by the region's instability, thus helping to consolidate peace in the fragile post-conflict period.

However, we are not here today merely to congratulate ourselves on past achievements. The organizers of this gathering wish us to focus on the region's outstanding challenges. And rightly so. Despite the remarkable progress achieved, Central America continues to face formidable challenges, including in the areas of public security, development, and human rights.

Central America has already made impressive strides towards the Millennium Development Goals, our global framework for creating a better world for all. This year marks the midpoint between the adoption of the Goals and the target date of 2015 by which we hope to achieve them. That makes it especially important for there to be more concerted action -- nationally, regionally and internationally -- to ensure that all Goals are attained for all people and groups within each country.

In Central America, daunting challenges remain in reaching the Goals. The overall progress achieved is offset by high levels of income inequality. Crime, partly fuelled by the drug trade and the easy access to a large supply of illicit small arms, is another serious

obstacle to development in this region. Crime scares away investors. It encourages “brain drain”. And it erodes support for democracy.

The perception that democracy has still not responded to the aspirations of the region’s poor brings home to us the need to make the fight against poverty and extreme social inequality a regional priority. Some of these problems would benefit from regional and international cooperation; others can be resolved through more effective performance by institutional structures already in place.

Member States of the United Nations agree that the three pillars of our work -- development, security and human rights -- are not only vitally important in their own right; they reinforce -- indeed, depend on -- each other.

Given the region’s history and its recent transformation from war to peace, Central America is well placed to appreciate the inextricable links between development, security and human rights. The United Nations stands ready to assist the people and Governments of Central America in any way we can -- across these three pillars -- to help them surmount the considerable challenges that lie ahead.

To conclude, allow me to take this opportunity to pay special tribute to President Arias for his vision and pioneering work in favour of a global arms trade treaty. Late last year, the United Nations set in motion a multilateral process for negotiating such a treaty. The objective is to establish common international standards for the import, export and transfer of all conventional arms. In doing so, the treaty would make a major contribution to the attainment of humanitarian, human rights and development objectives worldwide.

Let us take inspiration from this important initiative as we reflect on the way forward in Central America.

I wish you success in your deliberations today.

Thank you very much. *Muchas gracias.*