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STATEMENT ON CENTRAL AMERICAN PRESIDENTIAL SUMMIT IN MANAGUA

Today's and tomorrow's Central American presidential summit in Managua will provide the region's five leaders with a final opportunity, before Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega leaves office on April 25 and Costa Rican President Oscar Arias is replaced on May 8, to at long last effectively enforce the one concession granted to the Sandinistas under the Tesoro Beach agreements reached in February 1989 -- the demobilization of the contra rebels, who, according to some alarming reports, are now leaving northern Nicaragua and heading back to their old bases in Honduras. While the Managua gathering will undoubtedly focus once again on the persistent contra question, one can only hope that the five presidents will not continue to ignore serious human rights abuses in Guatemala, and the ongoing civil war and continuing ineffectiveness of the criminal justice system in El Salvador, which has permitted military personnel to kill civilians with impunity, including the November murder of six Jesuit priests.

The recent week-long recall by the U.S. Department of State of Ambassador Thomas Stroock from Guatemala, in response to that country's deteriorating human rights condition, was a significant act. But it must be backed up by even stronger protests by President Vinicio Cerezo's neighbors against his all but ignoring the increased acts of brutality by his nation's military, which remains one of the hemisphere's most repressive and corrupt forces. On March 7, the United Nations Human Rights Commission (UNHCR) responded to the significant increase in extrajudicial killings, kidnappings and attacks in Guatemala by calling upon Secretary General Javier Perez de Cuellar to assign an "Independent Expert" to monitor such abuses in the country. In its statement, the UNHCR "urgently appeal[ed] to the [government] to continue to accord priority to its undertaking under the Esquipulas II Agreements and to promote and participate more actively in the national reconciliation dialogue."

A weak agreement, meant more to placate international public opinion than to achieve real success, was reached on Friday between the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity and the National Commission of Reconciliation. Based on the Esquipulas II Agreements, the accord establishes the framework for some future dialogue between the two groups in order to end that country's armed conflict, which has resulted in more than 75,000 deaths during the past 30 years.

Cerezo is not the only Central American leader who has all but ignored his responsibility to comply with the spirit of regional peace and reconciliation. One week after an announcement that his country's National Assembly is considering a petition for a sweeping amnesty of military personnel accused or convicted of common crimes and human rights violations, Salvadoran President Alfredo Cristiani indicated that he was "not confident" that Col. Guillermo Alfredo Benavides, the highest-ranking of the nine armed forces members charged in the November killings of six Jesuit priests, would be convicted of any crime.

The proposed pardon, which does not apply to imprisoned FMLN guerrillas, will undoubtedly prove to be yet another obstacle in the ever-precarious negotiating process between the government and the rebels, and stands in marked contrast to an amnesty granted in Nicaragua earlier this year by the Sandinista government, through which the FSLN released 1,151 contra rebels and the remaining 39 members of Somoza's National Guard. After this action, human rights monitors generally have agreed that no political prisoners remain in Nicaragua.

While the upcoming Wednesday meeting in Geneva of Perez de Cuellar, representatives of the Salvadoran government and the FMLN is an encouraging sign, it must be backed up by a sustained effort to continue these talks and demands that a peace process be implemented, as such efforts represent the only way to end El Salvador's protracted civil war.

While the Nicaraguan electoral process and subsequent negotiations have provided a framework, albeit a shaky one, within which to settle the issue of contra demobilization, it more importantly should serve as an example and as a starting point for the region's other nations to seriously commit themselves to solving their internal conflicts, which are the ultimate road block to any true Central American peace.