

Discurso Frecuente

DR. RICARDO ARIAS CALDERON
VICE PRESIDENT AND MINISTER OF GOVERNMENT AND JUSTICE

I am very pleased to be here today with you and I appreciate very much the invitation and the opportunity to explain to you one aspect of the democratic government's policy, the aspect dealing with public security and specifically with the new Public Force. But first of all, let me give you something about the environment of these past three months. I think we have accomplished two basic tasks. The first one is to effectively move from a dictatorship to constitutional democratic institutions. For the first time in the generation, the Panamanians live today under a democratic regime with an Executive Branch which is the result of the overwhelming majority of the voters of Panama, with a Legislative Branch which is also the result of the electoral rule of the Panamanian people, and with a Judiciary under a Supreme Court which when jobs with historical perspectives will very likely be jobs as one of the most qualified and independent courts in our Republic in history. The list today, full freedom of the press, and God knows I know something about the cost of that freedom of the press personally not only for having helped build one of Panama's best newspapers, La Prensa, but for being now the object of its evaluation. And there is not one Panamanian today who is in prison at the order of the Executive Branch of government. Everyone who is in prison, including the 50 members of the former Panama Defense Forces who are in prison, are there at the orders of the Judiciary Branch of Panama's government. This I think has been our major accomplishment uptodate passing in three months from a dictatorship to a functioning constitution of democracy which needs to be consolidated and strengthened, but which already exists in fact and reality. We have I think, accomplished a second major task. I wish I could say that we have begun effectively economic reconstruction, but I would have to take too many poetic licenses to be able to say that. Economic reconstruction in our country has not yet gotten started fully, but we have created an environment where this is possible and where we can say honestly it is worth coming. It is an environment that involves a change of attitude in our country from one of fear and conviction that tomorrow would be worst than today, to an attitude of hope and expectation that tomorrow can be better than today. There is no way for a country to undertake economic reconstruction unless it believes in itself and unless it has hopes in its future. And I think that we can say today that we believe in ourselves and we have better hopes for the future than at any other time in our recent history. That is, the first accomplishment to create an environment for reconstruction is possible. A second one has been to establish financial order out of an incredible financial caos and to put a radical stop to administrative corruption. It has been a difficult and painful task to do both things, but it has been done in three months time. And what we have now to do is to maintain that direction of financial order and administrative honesty, but our point of departure in both

respects is solid. There is a third factor that has helped create this environment where reconstruction is possible. Panama's economy is the most opened economy in the whole Latin American hemisphere and it should remain open and in fact be more open in the future than it has been in the past, and it should move more frankly into a market economy than it has been so in the past. But because of that openness it is an economy that requires more melding in the relationship between Panama and the international community. International, normal international relations are not a compliment that can be added to other things in Panama. It's a basic condition for the country being able to have a healthy economy and we have in three months reached nearly a full international normalcy with the United States, with the European community, with the major industrial nations of Asia, and with almost all of our Latin American brothers so while we have to admit that thus far economic reconstruction has not gotten fully underway and that poses a growing problem because it means the continuation of a 30% rate of unemployment and it means the continuation of a banking system that is partially frozen. We have nevertheless been able to create the environment in the change of attitude in financial order and a stop to corruption and in normalization of our diplomatic relationships so that we can say economic reconstruction is now effectively possible and hopefully it is forthcoming. There is a common condition to both of these successes that they be able to continue and to consolidate themselves. The common condition is that we be able to provide our country with basic security to our population and full respect for human rights and that this security be provided by ourselves by our national organization of Public Force. If we are able to do that, then our democracy will not just be a pledging democracy, but will become a stable democracy. And if we are able to do that, we will enhance the environment that will make possible economic reconstruction because obviously without security, basic security for the population and respect for human rights, there will not be the increase in investments, the creation of new job opportunities, the betterment of peoples lives. I want to speak and to address the issue of how we are attempting to provide that security and full respect for human rights. The beginning of our policy was not somebody else's model, was an experience, a traumatic experience. The experience of having to ask ourselves between the 20th and the 22nd of December, how are we going to have a Public Force in Panama, that is after the U.S. military action and the tumbling down of the dictatorial regime. There were two basic possibilities: One I call the zero option. We are clear from the start that the Defense Forces as an institution could no longer exist. And we are clear from the start that as a symbol of the end of the Defense Forces as they existed, their Avenue A headquarters had to be raided once and for all. But what would we do after that? There was an option possible, an option that has crossed every Panamanian's mind. And an option that clearly crossed our

minds. I speak in plural, because this was a decision taken under President Endara and with the participation of second Vice-President Ford. It also crossed our minds. It was the decision to start from zero to say all former members of the Panamanian Defense Forces are all of them dismissed and we would have to start from zero. But no sooner formulated the policy that the incredible risk and cost of such a policy were evident to us. What would happen to the 16,000 approximate members in one way or the other of the Panama Defense Forces? What would happen to them in a Panama that could not offer economic alternatives of a productive job? Where would they go? What would they do? Would such a policy increase our chance of a secure and stable democracy, or would they lead the siege of growing violence and unrest. We felt that such policy would do the second and not the first. But also we have to ask ourselves if we started from zero, how long would it take to create from zero a new security organization, call it what you want. Clearly it would not be a matter of weeks, or months, it would have been a matter of at least two, three, four years. In conditions, very difficult to choose people, to recruit people, to train people, to form from nothing an organization to have them acquire experience and then tell them, 'You're our security, our security is in your hands'. And what would we do during those one, two, three, four years? We would have asked to turn to the U.S. and say, 'You have to stay as a major security agent'. And that was not our objective nor was it the objective of the U.S. Government? So in reality this objective, this option, this option of starting from zero was probably the most costly and risky of all options that we have facing us. So we took the other one which has it's own risks and it's own cost. No policy is without risk. And no policy is without cost. The second policy is what we call 'A Call To Service'. To call the former members of the Panama Defense Forces to render a new service to their country under new terms of loyalty, loyalty to the constitution and to democracy without promising amnesty to anyone, without promising pardon to anyone, without promising immunity to anyone. We took that second option, and that is the start of the policy that I am about to detail for you. But let me mention to you that no Latin American country in the past quarter of the century has proceeded upon democratization to carry out as deep a transformation of its security organization as we are undertaking. Everyone of the Latin American democracies, beginning with Venezuela a quarter of a century ago, and going through those who have democratized themselves in the past decade, Ecuador and Peru and then Bolivia and then Chile and then Argentina not as chronological then, but a geographical then and Uruguay and Brazil and Honduras and Guatemala and El Salvador. Not one of them has undertaken a profound transformation of their military establishments whereas we took a basic decision as our policy to take what was a military establishment and turn it into a police establishment convinced that our basic security could be obtained through a

modern professional police organization. What are the elements of this policy? In order to appreciate the elements of this policy I would have to take a point of reference, the defense force establishment as it existed in the month of December previous to U.S. military action. Let me say just one thing about that establishment. It wasn't just created by General Noriega in the last six years as full time dictator. It wasn't even just created by 21 years of military regime. It took four decades to come about. It began about 1939 to 1940 when a very limited Police Service began to be transformed into a more professional Police Service before the Second World War. Already in that first change there were signs of authoritarianism from the very start. It then went on after the Second World War in the context of the cold war both for internal reasons and because of U.S. influence, a change from a national police into a national guard in the model of the Somosa National Guard and the element of militarization increased. There was a third decisive moment after 1968 and the military coupe when under General Torrijos the National Guard became growingly militarized more and more and adopted more and more a military organization. And that combination came after 1983 when Noriega assumed really decisive power in Panama and converted the National Guard into the so called Defense Forces. So what we are dealing with isn't trying to change a policy of the last six years or of the last 20 years. It is attempting to strike out on a new path after 40 years of moving in a given direction step by step and degree by degree. I mentioned that because the group of the policy which has been adopted by President Endara has to be given time to show what it can do. But already in three months much has been accomplished. What? First of all we have taken out of military control a series of state agencies which have no role being under military control. For example, the Office of Immigration and Naturalization which permitted the military under Noriega to have control of all the movements in and out of the country both of citizens and foreigners. We have also taken out of military control the Department of Traffic and Transportation which plays under the military's control all the basic land transportation in the country, from giving a driver license to giving authorization for a taxi. We have also taken out of military control what used to be called the Department of National Investigation now called the Technical Judicial Police which is the agency, in some ways but only in some ways, equivalent to the U.S. FBI that does basic investigation that can lead to judiciary action. Eventually, not only have we taken this office away from military control, but it will be out of Executive Branch of government and become a part of the Judiciary because in our tradition the Attorney General's Office is not in the Executive Branch, but in the Judiciary Branch. So it should be an instrument, a police instrument, a technical investigative instrument of the Attorney General's Office within the Judiciary and hopefully within the next weeks or months the law will be

approved by the National Assembly to move this agency not just out of the military which as already is, but out of the Executive Branch. The policy has been adopted to develop when time and the budget permits a fully civilian penitentiary system, but meanwhile we have an ambivalent system where administration and supervision are growingly in civilian hands. But the role of custodians of the penitentiary system remains in the hands of the present National Police Organization. We even found that the administration of the implementation of the Canal Treaties from the Panamanian point of view had in fact fallen under the responsibility of the military and it is now past where it should always have been and now is under the responsibility of the President through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. That is to say, we have rendered civilian impact and reality a series of agencies through which the former PDF controls key areas of Panama's public security. What else have we done? We have attempted and are attempting and are gaining very significant ground in obtaining the basic transformation of the military corps of the PDF. After a 40 year period of development, Panama already has the basic beginnings of an Army, of an Airforce, of a Navy, and remain these three branches under one exclusive command. Also, under that same exclusive command was a Presidential guard, the purpose of which was much more than to protect the President, to control the President. What have we done with that corps? Two basic things. One of them is to redefine the functions of each of its components in police terms so that we no longer have nor when we have an Army, Panama does not need one for it's basic securities. What we will have is a National Police Corps. We no longer have nor will we have an Air Force. What we will have is a National Air Service providing air transportation for all components of the government including the National Police. We will not have a Navy, we will have a National Maritime Service providing sea transportation for all components of the government and also for fulfilling the functions in some ways similar to your Coast Guards of Sea Police giving the more than 1,500 islands within our territory the extent of our coast and all the basic peace problems that are related to both of those realities. The Presidential Guard is being transformed into what we call an Institutional Protection Service in some ways similar to your Secret Service, but not limited to providing security for the President or the Presidential residence, but extending to the basic functionaries of the government and hopefully to the leaders of the opposition parties which in a modern society, modern democratic society have a need for such protection as much and some times even more than governmental leaders. So what we have attempted to do is to redefine in police terms each of these services, but secondly we have separated them so that each will have a joint command structure separate from the others. Each will have its own membership separate from the others. Each will have its own budget separate from the others and, in fact, the four services

are no longer under one ministry. Three of them: the National Police, the Air Service, and the Maritime Service are under the Ministry of Government and Justice which is now the Ministry I head. And the Institutional Protection Service is now another Ministry of the Presidency. This last fact may not have all the resonance for you that it has for us Panamanians. Twice in our history in the '50s and in the late '60s, a President attempted to separate the Presidential guard from the other security service and twice in our history that produced the overthrow of the President. This was accomplished in the past 30 days without a similar result, but even more interestingly at the suggestion of the present leaders of the National Police. As a result of these changes in function, whether union leaders or leaders of Chambers of Commerce, whoever had any dealings and associations and complicities with the PDF or with the civilian part of the dictatorship, they should be left out of our economy's life. What would we be doing? We would be behaving Noriega-like. We would be condemning categories of people not to have a part in Panama's future, not to take part in Panama's democracy, to be permanently second class citizen's. Is that the way to build a new nation? Is that the way to find the possibility to reconcile a people with itself. I say plainly no. And that we have to take the risks that we are taking if we want to build a nation free from the hatred and the divisions that the dictatorship planted, and planted deeply in our soil. But that doesn't mean that we don't carry out a process of evaluation. And let me give you some of the results of that process. Through executive initiative, a 100% of the Colonels who were active on the 19th of December are out of the Public Force today. The only person carrying the title of Colonel was promoted to that title by President Endara. 82% of all Lieutenant Colonels are out of the service. Three who were active remain one of them in an uncomfortable position because he was distrusted by the regime. Three remain and two new ones have been named by President Endara. 38% of all majors are out. 31% of all captains are out. 19% of all lieutenants are out, 10% of all sub-lieutenants. Clearly the percentages were higher where responsibility was higher. A total of almost 20% of all former PDF officers are no longer in service of the new Public Force in any of its branches. And 50 have been and remain arrested and are at the orders of the Judicial Branch of Panama. These are the basic elements of the way we are attempting to solve a conundrum. Some days ago, a woman I have known for many years came up to me and she was all wild up about some of the things she was reading in the newspapers. Over time I have grown used to that so I sleep well regardless. And she told me, "Look I know what your problem is and what President Endara's problem is with the new Public Force." I said, "What is it?" She says, "Look all Panamanians want to have no more men in uniforms, no more men with arms, no more security covers so as not to have a dictatorship. But all Panamanians want to have many men in uniform, many men with arms, and many men in security agencies so

as to be safe from delinquency. All you have to do is do both things at the same time." We have a saying in Panama when a conundrum like that comes up, "alguien que quiere estar en la procesion y tocando las campanas." "Someone who wants to be walking in the procession and being the tower ringing the bells." Well, I think we are doing both things quite well. I think we are assuring the population more and more as time goes on that there will be no condition for a repetition of the dictatorship under which we suffered. But I also think more and more, as days go by, we are capable through the services we have organized to provide our people with basic security in true respect for human rights. And I have to say as someone who has spent 21 years each day of the dictatorship in opposition of that regime, my opposition began at the first moment I knew of the overthrow and did not end till the very last. I have to say because thence the witness I fill compelled to give that there is a growing number of people in the new Public Force who identify with their new role, who are beginning to act as feeling comfortable and hopeful in their new role which is not an easy one. And to my think are growingly committed to their new role. But whether that committment is full in all the memberships and whether it is lasting will not depend just on them, it will depend on the whole behavior of our community. Military overthrows are not just the result of the military, they are also the result of the mistakes and weaknesses of the civilians. We didn't have a coupe d'etat in 1968 simply because the military decided to have one. Yes they decided to have one. Yes it was a historic mistake. But it was conditioned by mistakes and weaknesses in the civilian and political structure of the country. So the future of this policy does not depend just on the government, though clearly we have a great responsibility, does not depend just on the behavior, a new behavior, a new identity of people we have called to new service. It will depend also on the maturity with which the whole community of Panama reinforces this policy. If the Panamanian people were to keep pointing the finger and saying, "You belong still to Noriega", what future is there for change? Very little. But if on the contrary instead of pointing the finger, a hand is offered and said, "I offer it on conditions of a different identity and a different behavior", then a future is clearly possible. I was, in the first days and in the first weeks, very concerned with the early reactions to the policy and very worried about it and I have to confess I wasn't sure of many of the people I am working with now in the Public Force, but as time goes on and I know them better and I see them act growingly differently, as time goes on and as I see the population shift in its concern from an understandable, backward looking concern to a new present and future looking concern I am growingly assured that we are on the right track. But finally whether we are or not will be decided by the Panamanian people in national discussion and through the expression of their will in the National Assembly when it gets to the moment of voting a definite law of the new Public Force. I think that that law is likely to cristalize and formalize the policy that President Endara has adopted.