

**Statement by Ambassador Nestor Mendez, Chair of the Permanent Council of
the OAS at the Inter-American Peace Forum Luncheon**

OAS Headquarters, September 23, 2008.

His Excellency Jose Miguel Insulza – Secretary General of the OAS

His Excellency Albert Ramdin – Assistant Secretary General

Distinguished Speakers and Panelists of the First Inter-American Peace Forum
Ambassadors, distinguished guests:

I am honored and privileged to welcome you in my capacity as Chair of the Permanent Council of the Organization of American States, and to address you at this luncheon to mark the launching of the Inter-American Peace Forum. On a personal note, it is especially gratifying for me as the representative of Belize, to note that September 21, which is designated by the United Nations as the International Day of Peace, also coincides with the date of the Independence of Belize. Last Sunday, September 21, Belize celebrated the Twenty- Seventh Anniversary of its Independence.

The Inter-American Peace Forum is a singular undertaking with tremendous potential for promoting a culture of peace, and it is a natural fit for an organization whose Charter calls for the achievement of peace and justice as two of its founding principles. Indeed, the OAS is the undisputed advocate, promoter and guardian of democracy and human rights in this hemisphere, which, although they are indeed noble necessities, they are also no less than the pillars that sustain, along with integral development, an order of peace and stability in the Americas.

This morning we have listened to the truly remarkable and inspiring words of President Oscar Arias Arias Sanchez of Costa Rica, and to the serious and profound statement by Secretary General Insulza. We are looking forward to the panel presentations of this afternoon, and to the very constructive discussions that these presentations will surely stimulate. In this context, I wish to address only two issues which are intimately associated with these discussions, and which have been alluded to this morning.

I wish to touch first of all, on the OAS Fund for Peace: Peaceful Settlement of Territorial Disputes. The Fund for Peace is that invaluable facility whose success has surpassed the expectations of many of its original proponents, and which has had a direct positive impact on at least three border and territorial disputes in Central America. The Fund for Peace is a concrete, tangible and practical instrument that the OAS has used to implement its mandate of ensuring peace and stability. As the representative of Belize, I can attest to the great utility of the fund, and it is no secret that the Belize Guatemala Sub-Fund of the Peace fund has been the conduit for the channeling of much needed funds which have been used by the OAS to implement sensitive and far reaching projects like the Santa Rosa Resettlement Project.

The Governments of Belize and Guatemala have now accepted the recommendation of the Secretary General of the OAS that the territorial dispute should be submitted to the International Court of Justice for a resolution, and both countries are now embarked in preparations to move in this direction. Bearing in mind the commitment of the OAS to assist both Belize and Guatemala in their quest for a resolution of the dispute, and considering the fact that the Peace Fund

has been an integral element in the entire process between Belize and Guatemala, our two countries are now working with the OAS to ensure that the Peace Fund will remain a critical component of OAS assistance. For the first time, the Peace Fund will be instrumental in channeling resources for an adjudication process before the International Court of Justice. This is practical peace-building. It is concrete, valuable assistance from the OAS and the donor countries, and we thank them for it.

In this regard, I wish to posit that even as the organization focuses on the necessary international political advocacy for peace in our hemisphere, through very important activities such as the Inter-American Peace Forum, that we must build on the success of instruments such as the OAS Peace Fund, and that we must find a way to fortify it.

The second issue I wish to touch on flows from the first one, and it is an issue that occupies the minds of many of our leaders today. It has become increasingly clear, that even as more and more member states of the OAS seek the path of adjudication and arbitration for the resolution of trans-border disputes, more and more the threat to peace and stability in our societies is coming from within our very borders. I refer of course to the chronic problem of crime and violence in our towns and cities, in our villages and border areas, and in our streets and neighborhoods. Social scientists claim that the seemingly unstoppable wave of violence is reflective of a deficit of opportunities and the tremendous social inequality that characterizes our region. Law enforcement professionals attribute the problems to drug trafficking, the proliferation of small arms, and general disregard for the law.

The truth is, all of them are right to a certain extent. Our societies are imploding from within, even as the threats from outside are diminishing. It is my hope that the Inter-American Peace Forum and the analysis it will undertake of the meaning of peace in today's world, will help us to understand these problems better, and help us think creatively of collective ways to seek peace from within our societies.

I wish to close with a quotation from His Holiness the Dalai Lama, who said "Peace, in the sense of the absence of war, is of little value to someone who is dying of hunger or cold. It will not remove the pain of torture inflicted on a prisoner of conscience. It does not comfort those who have lost their loved ones in floods caused by senseless deforestation in a neighboring country. Peace can only last where human rights are respected, where people are fed, and where individuals and nations are free."

Thank you.