

**DINNER OFFERED BY THE PRESIDENT OF THE
REPUBLIC OF INDIA, SHRI KOCHERIL RAMAN
NARAYANAN. New Delhi, March 5th, 2001**

Reverence... I find no better word to describe what people from other parts of the world feel when they visit the Indian subcontinent.

Reverence... Because before our amazed eyes stands the testimony and legacy of a millenary civilization whose origin is intertwined with the genesis of the world. Because we feel surrounded by the divine spirit that floats in this heavenly and magic light, the essence that nourishes the religious sentiment of all men.

Today we are very grateful for the hospitality extended to us by the people of India, duly represented in your Excellency, Shri Kocheril Raman Narayanan, and we feel as if two supplementary cultures embrace themselves at this meeting: the Indian culture, full of spirituality and mysticism, and the other, the Colombian culture, with all the magic and vitality of the American tropics, that looks at your country, Mr. President, with young eyes filled with respect and admiration.

Your Excellency:

I wish, on behalf of forty million Colombian hearts, to express to you first the solidarity and fraternal sentiments of our people in the recent natural tragedy suffered by your country, when the earth trembled in the State of Gujarat, the same land that witnessed the birth of the great leader of peace: Mahatma Gandhi.

Our soul is saddened by the pain suffered by your fellow countrymen and we pray the Almighty brings relief and comfort to those who lost so much last January 26th. We too have witnessed with great admiration the miracles of life produced by this ancestral land, when children and elderly people rose from the debris, several days after the earthquake, as clear proof of the strength and tenacity of human beings.

Today my country confronts the challenges posed by the world drug problem, by violence and poverty, with the same courage exemplified by the Republic of India.

For almost four decades Colombia has endured the brunts of an internal conflict where brothers see their brothers bleed to

death, promoted by a small minority that does not believe in democratic channels and whose members do not even represent one out of every thousand Colombians.

I have personally been at the forefront of the peace process with the oldest rebel group in our country. We are now at the negotiation stage. Such negotiation is taking place in an area of detente established with the sole purpose of holding the peace talks. We have also established contact with the second largest rebel group, with a very good outlook, and with the unanimous and generous support of the international community, that has given us its political support to turn this process into the engine that will help us attain our ultimate goal: peace. And there is no going back.

The road to peace is not easy, nor does it yield immediate results, yet it is the only road. I frequently remind Colombians of the wise and true words said by Gandhi, the father of the Indian nation: "There are no roads to peace: peace is the road".

Unfortunately, violence in Colombia has been compounded and financed by the evil interests of narcotics traffickers who

breed death and corruption throughout the world. This is a world problem and the international community cannot turn its back on Colombia. You and I know that we will only put an end to this problem if we confront it together, under the principle of shared responsibility.

My government has designed an integral strategy to strengthen my country's institutions and increase social investment in my country. The objectives sought include offering productive alternatives to those presently engaged in growing coca leaf or poppy seed as their means of subsistence. This strategy – which includes the peace process, improving the justice system, servicing the population displaced by violence, programs for disseminating and protecting human rights, and building social infrastructure – has received the enthusiastic support of several countries and world agencies, both at an individual level as well as through the Peace Process Support Group established last year in Madrid.

Important strides have been made along a promising road. We are walking hand in hand with the international community, towards a ~~feature~~future of peace, economic prosperity, and

social justice that we now want to share with the people of India.

Your Excellency:

In the international arena we have always admired the neutral and non-alignment character of India ever since its independence, a character made even more evident when Prime Minister Nehru acted as one of the founding fathers of the Movement of Non Aligning Countries, a movement to which Colombia presently belongs, and where we have played a very active and leading role.

Our two nations share a seat in important international fora such as the United Nations Organization, the World Trade Organization, the G-77 and, more recently, inside the G-15, to which Colombia was admitted last year with your country's blessing.

Colombia sees India as a peace loving country. Your cooperation with the United Nations, and the Security Council in particular, is very important for the maintenance peace and

international security, as well as for the stability and promotion of democracy in the Asian continent.

Now that our country holds a seat as a non permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, from last January 1st through December 31st of the year 2002, I wish to reiterate to the people of India the overwhelming importance we attach to the process for expanding and reforming the Security Council, because we must correct the imbalances of its present composition, improve decision making processes, and accord greater transparency to the conduct of its business, to ensure a better and more legitimate representation of all of the Organization's member countries.

In this forum, as well as in many other fora, we can join efforts to achieve the common goal of having a safer world in peace, where diversity is a means of cultural enrichment and not grounds for controversy.

Your Excellency:

Today when we feel so taken and amazed by the beauty of New Delhi and the impressive architectural monument of

Rashtrapati Bhawan, I wish to tell you that we bring from Colombia, the oldest and most stable democracy in the Americas, a token of friendship for the people of India, the greatest democracy in the world.

You and I, Mr. President Narayanan are both journalists and as such we are well aware of the importance of communication between people and among States. That is why we want to learn and grow together.

We have come here to talk about Colombia, its opportunities and its present reality, but we have also come to acknowledge India, as a country that has lot to teach us, not only in the field of spirituality, but also in the practical and modern field of computers, biotechnology, and the pharmaceutical industry, among other fields you pioneer.

The great poet Rabindranath Tagore once wrote: “Words go straight to the heart when they come from the heart”. I know that what I told you today on behalf of the people of Colombia will go straight to the hearts of the people of India, because my words are sincere and they come from the bottom of my heart.

I raise my glass Mr. President and I toast to your health, to the health of your dear wife, first Lady Usha Narayanan; I toast to enhancing our excellent relations, and finally, I toast for the happiness of the people of India: For those over one billion people who represent mankind's most sacred legacy.

Thank you very much.