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President: Mr. Operti (Uruguay)

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Agenda item 157

Bethlehem 2000

Draft resolution (A/53/L.37)

The President (*interpretation from Spanish*): I give the floor to the representative of Senegal, Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, to introduce draft resolution A/53/L.37.

Mr. Ka (Senegal) (*interpretation from French*): Our Lord Jesus Christ said, in a sublime message:

“So peace is on me the day I was born, the day that I die, and the day that I shall be raised up to life (again)!” (*The Holy Koran, XIX:33*)

What could be more natural than that, as the third millennium dawns, an entire year be devoted to commemorating the birth of this Lord of Peace.

As the twentieth century draws to an end, the peoples of the entire world await with growing impatience the arrival of the new millennium in the hope of a better world, a world of peace, reconciliation and understanding among all peoples in all parts of the world. The celebration of the next millennium will be particularly important, for it will also mark the two thousandth anniversary of the birth of Jesus Christ in Bethlehem, which brought to the small town

of Bethlehem, in Palestine, a cultural and religious significance that is unique throughout history. This event is thus of monumental importance, not only to the Palestinian people and to the Middle East, but to all the world’s believers and to all the international community.

The commemoration of the two thousandth anniversary of the birth of Jesus Christ in Bethlehem is particularly symbolic, for it comes at a time when the peoples of the region have new hope and new reasons for believing that the question of Palestine will reach a peaceful outcome which will promote peace, stability and prosperity in the region. It is our hope today that this commemoration will herald the dawn of a new era of dialogue, reconciliation and economic recovery for Palestinians, Israelis and all the peoples of the Middle East.

The name Bethlehem evokes scenes of rare beauty, enhanced by breathtakingly beautiful landscapes and by the perfect and symbiotic meshing of Eastern and Western cultures. Unfortunately, decades of conflict have altered the precious treasures of Bethlehem and have had a negative impact on the socio-economic infrastructure of the town and the surrounding areas. Many magnificent buildings now need restoration. The infrastructures in the town have to be rebuilt, particularly given that massive numbers of pilgrims are expected to arrive from all corners of the globe.

Responding to the appeal made by President Yasser Arafat, President of the Palestinian Authority, at the

conference in support of the inalienable rights of the Palestinian People held in Brussels in February 1998, our Committee indicated that it would fully support the Bethlehem 2000 project of the Palestinian Authority.

The project includes commemorative cultural events that will be international in character, the restoration and modernization of the city's infrastructure, the improvement of basic social, health and security services, preservation of the rich Palestinian history and the provision of all the necessary tourist services.

The conference of participants in the Bethlehem 2000 project, which was also held in Brussels, in May 1998 — and which I had the privilege of attending together with President Arafat, the President of the European Community and the Director-General of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) — showed the broad international support for the project on the part of donor Governments, organizations within the United Nations system, the European Commission, UNESCO, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the World Bank, other intergovernmental organizations, the private sector, the media and non-governmental organizations. The level of contributions to date is very encouraging. At the same time, more must be done to ensure the success of this commendable Palestinian initiative at a time when the Palestinian people still face serious difficulties.

The Committee is firmly convinced that the reconstruction of the historic sites in this Holy Land will be a well-deserved tribute to the historic and religious importance of Bethlehem on the occasion of the commemoration of the millennium, particularly for future generations, for whom Bethlehem will always be the symbol of lasting spiritual and cultural harmony. The Committee also believes that solid improvements on the ground in the area around Bethlehem are necessary, especially with regard to guaranteeing freedom of movement and free and unhindered access to the holy places in Bethlehem for the faithful of all religions and nationalities.

The Committee is doing all it can to inform and mobilize public opinion in all regions in support of this project through meetings and other activities to provide information. In this context the Committee, with the support of the Italian Government, will be organizing early next year in Rome an international conference on Bethlehem 2000 designed to promote this initiative and to ensure the broadest possible international participation in it. The

conference will be an opportunity for all parties concerned to increase dialogue and cooperation for the promotion of peace and reconciliation, to assess the progress made in the project and to determine needs, with a view to mobilizing additional international support.

This event can be successful only if there is commitment and participation by the international community as a whole. The Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People believes that the commemoration of the millennium in Bethlehem is a unique opportunity for all peoples, whatever their beliefs, race or nationality, to come together to reflect upon the lessons of the unique messages of peace, reconciliation and love which have come from this crossroads of history and of the world.

There can be no better time for us to reaffirm our belief in these eternal messages. There can be no better time for members of the human race to be reconciled with each other and to heal the wounds inflicted by past conflicts so that we can at last reaffirm our desire for a better life for all at the dawn of the twenty-first century.

The events to commemorate the millennium in Bethlehem will begin at Christmas 1999 and continue until Easter 2001.

On behalf of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, I now have the honour to introduce the draft resolution entitled "Bethlehem 2000". First of all, I should like to take this opportunity to announce that Algeria, Guyana and Niger have also sponsored the draft resolution.

In the draft resolution, the General Assembly welcomes the global and historic event to mark both the commemoration of the birth of Jesus Christ and the beginning of the third millennium. It associates itself fully with the Palestinian initiative for the Bethlehem 2000 project and encourages the international community, in particular the bodies of the United Nations, to offer assistance to bring about the objectives set forth therein. In order for this commemoration to be duly channelled and supported in a spirit of peace and reconciliation in the Middle East, a request has again been made that the item entitled "Bethlehem 2000" be included in the provisional agenda of the fifty-fourth session of the General Assembly.

(spoke in English)

I would like, on behalf of the sponsors of the draft resolution, to introduce the following revision in the first preambular paragraph. The words "Bethlehem, in the Palestinian land" should be replaced with the words "the Palestinian city of Bethlehem". The entire paragraph would then read:

"Recalling the fact that the Palestinian city of Bethlehem is the birthplace of Jesus Christ and one of the most historic and significant sites on earth".

(spoke in French)

I should like to extend the Committee's deep appreciation to Governments, bodies of the United Nations and intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations which from the very beginning have embraced the idea of the Bethlehem 2000 project by making their contribution and supporting the spirit of this initiative.

The draft resolution reflects our hopes and our common aspirations for a better world at the dawn of the new millennium. The Committee believes that consensus adoption of the draft resolution will contribute to supporting and promoting the peace process which we all hold dear. I would therefore encourage all Member States to support the draft resolution by adopting it by consensus.

The President (*interpretation from Spanish*): Before proceeding further, I should like to inform members that, in a letter dated 14 October 1998 addressed to me, the Permanent Representative of Andorra to the United Nations, in his capacity as Chairman of the Group of Western European and Other States for the month of October, requests that the General Assembly hear in plenary meeting a statement by the Observer of the Holy See on agenda item 157, entitled "Bethlehem 2000".

Taking into account the importance attached to the issue under discussion, it is proposed that the General Assembly take a decision on that request. May I take it that there is no objection to the proposal to hear the Observer of the Holy See on this agenda item?

It was so decided.

Mr. Al-Kidwa (Palestine) (*interpretation from Arabic*): On behalf of my delegation, I am taking the floor to address a new and important item on the agenda of the fifty-third session of the Assembly, namely item 157, entitled "Bethlehem 2000".

In accordance with the Gregorian calendar, the year 1999/2000 will bring the twentieth century and the second millennium to a close and the year 2000/2001 will mark the start of the third millennium for human civilization. The city of Bethlehem, Palestine, is of historic and symbolic prominence in this epic turning point in time.

Bethlehem is one of the most historic and religiously significant sites on earth. In the year 2000, the past and the future will converge in Bethlehem in a global vision of hope and peace for all peoples of the world. The world will celebrate the two thousandth anniversary of the birth of Jesus Christ in the city of Bethlehem and the onset of the new millennium. This occasion is of monumental importance not only for the Palestinian people and the Middle East region, but also for all the faithful and for the international community as a whole. Furthermore, this event in time has a multifaceted character. It comprises a religious, historical and civilizational dimension. The carrying out of a dignified, resplendent and celebratory commemoration, fitting for such an historic occasion, is clearly of primordial importance.

The process of planning, organizing and preparing for the celebration and commemoration of this major event in the city of Bethlehem is an immense endeavour that the Palestinian people and the Palestinian National Authority have happily undertaken. It started with the launching of the Bethlehem 2000 project in 1997, which included a timetable for the commemorative events to coincide with Christmas 1999, continue throughout the year 2000 and conclude at Easter 2001. It is estimated that approximately two million visitors will come to Bethlehem to celebrate this historic occasion that will be upon us with the dawning of the new millennium. However, the Palestinian people alone cannot deliver all that is required by this enormous task.

Unfortunately, the city of Bethlehem, like all other Palestinian cities, has suffered under the long and harsh years of occupation. Nonetheless it has remained steadfast in spite of the damage to and the deterioration of its infrastructure and a halt in its natural growth and progress as a city of the world. Therefore, the Palestinian people need the assistance of and engagement by the international community. Assistance is necessary to meet the diverse demands of this formidable undertaking in a manner that will ensure its fruition in an historic commemoration in which all the peoples of the world can rejoice.

Intense and concerted efforts, careful and detailed planning and preparations and sufficient funding are basic and essential prerequisites for the success of the Bethlehem 2000 celebration. In this regard, six programme components have been laid out by the Bethlehem 2000 project, including events, infrastructures, services, cultural heritage, tourism development and private sector development. The estimated total programme cost for the Bethlehem 2000 project, excluding private sector activities and development, is \$336 million.

In this regard, various donor countries, United Nations agencies, intergovernmental organizations, religious and international institutions and others have already become engaged and have begun contributing to the Bethlehem 2000 project. A major step was taken towards increasing the involvement of the international community in the project with the convening of the Bethlehem 2000 Participants Conference in Brussels on 11 and 12 May 1998, in association with the European Commission, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the World Bank. This Conference afforded an opportunity for decision makers from Governments and non-governmental organizations, the private sector, the international financial community, religious and cultural institutions and the media to participate in achieving the success of the Bethlehem 2000 project through financial contributions, investment, expertise and promotion of international awareness.

We express our deep gratitude to all those who have made generous contributions to this endeavour and who have cooperated and continue to cooperate with the Palestinian National Authority in the effort to ensure the great success of Bethlehem 2000. Nevertheless, we believe that continued and increased participation by the international community would be highly beneficial in the following fields: general organization and preparation for the occasion, financial and technical contributions to the preparations, and actual participation in the events and activities.

With regard to the United Nations itself, it is our hope that the international Organization will play a visible role in drawing the attention of the peoples of the world to the importance of this global occasion and in helping to make the event a point from which hope, peace, coexistence and prosperity for all humankind may flow. Accordingly, draft resolution A/53/L.37, entitled "Bethlehem 2000", is before the Assembly. The text was drafted with a view to gaining the support of all Member States. We hope therefore that the draft resolution will be adopted by consensus.

In closing, let me express our appreciation to the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, and particularly to its Chairman, the Permanent Representative of Senegal, and the other members of the Bureau, for taking the initiative on this important matter.

Mr. Sucharipa (Austria): I have the honour to speak on behalf of the European Union. In addition, the Central and Eastern European countries associated with the European Union — Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia — and the associated country Cyprus, as well as the European Free Trade Association country member of the European Economic Area Liechtenstein, align themselves with this statement.

As the two thousandth anniversary of the nativity in Bethlehem approaches, an estimated two million pilgrims and tourists are expected to visit the religious and archaeological sites in the area. This inflow will provide a unique opportunity to generate momentum in the development of the tourism sector and to help induce much needed economic growth and development in the area. At the same time, it constitutes an important challenge, which has to be met with great professionalism and specific means in the area of infrastructure and services.

The European Union, therefore, warmly welcomes the pilot project Bethlehem 2000 which has been initiated by the Palestinian Authority, the municipality of Bethlehem and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) with a view to preparing the city of Bethlehem for the start of the new millennium. Through concerted international and regional efforts, the project foresees the restoration of historical, archaeological and religious sites of importance. At the same time, the tourist sector will undergo important improvements in order to establish Bethlehem as a major tourist destination far beyond the 15-month millennium celebration. The European Union welcomes and encourages these development prospects.

In this context, the European Union is pleased to note that the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has expanded its 10-year-old programme of infrastructure improvements in the Bethlehem area to support the pilot project. Since early 1997, UNDP has been providing assistance through the execution of a wider range of infrastructure and other physical improvements, coupled with capacity-development

initiatives within the tourism service sector. We note with appreciation that this work has been carried out in close coordination, *inter alia*, with the Bethlehem municipality in order to ensure that UNDP's work is integrated within the overall framework of the Palestinian Authority and is acceptable to local residents.

We also note with appreciation that, among other donors, the World Bank is making an important contribution to the project with a view to strengthening the economic and cultural base and managerial capacities of the Bethlehem area municipalities and to fostering their sustainable development through tourism promotion and product development. It is envisaged that the preservation of cultural assets in the Bethlehem area will be fostered by initiating institutional reform and capacity-building.

On 11 and 12 May 1998 a conference on Bethlehem 2000 was convened in Brussels in association with the European Commission, UNDP, UNESCO and the World Bank. The main purpose of the conference, for which the European Commission provided logistical support, was to stimulate commitments from official and private donors as well as from potential investors in the private sector. The conference concluded with donors making a series of important pledges to the project. Early next year an international forum on Bethlehem 2000 will be hosted in Rome under the auspices of the United Nations and with the support, *inter alia*, of the Italian Government. The two-day forum, which is scheduled to take place on 18 and 19 February 1999 at the headquarters of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), will promote a global vision of peace and reconciliation on the eve of the new millennium. It will further dialogue among the peoples of the Middle East and will mobilize further international support for the Bethlehem 2000 project by the donor community and civil society. The European Union is looking forward to participating in that event.

It is the view of the European Union that in focusing on a clear set of priorities for Bethlehem 2000, development of the tourist sector should be promoted as one of the keys to economic growth in the area. The European Union therefore strongly encourages, in the context of Bethlehem 2000, continued coordination and cooperation in the area and with the international donor community.

The European Union is providing financial support to Bethlehem 2000 as well as to specific projects such as the expansion of the capacity and facilities of Beit Jala hospital and the renovation of the Old City's market. The European

Commission is providing about ECU 2 million for the upgrading of the infrastructure network.

The relevance of the dawn of a new millennium for the Palestinian people, the other peoples of the region and the international community as a whole is demonstrated by the celebrations that the new millennium will receive in many parts of the world, including the United Nations, culminating in the jubilee ceremonies in Rome on 5 November 2000. The major religious, historic and cultural dimensions of the event will require unimpeded access to the holy places in Bethlehem for the faithful of all religions and for persons of all nationalities.

Let me take this opportunity to express our appreciation to the Permanent Representative of Senegal, Ambassador Ka, for his efforts to promote the Bethlehem 2000 project.

In conclusion, the European Union would like to reaffirm once again today its firm commitment to a just and comprehensive settlement in the Middle East based on the Madrid and Oslo accords. Recognizing the importance of a sound economy to social and political stability among the Palestinian people, the European Union will continue its considerable economic and technical assistance with a view to contributing to a prosperous future in the next millennium.

Mr. Saliba (Malta) It gives me great pleasure to speak today on this important item, both as the Permanent Representative of Malta and as the Rapporteur of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People.

The approach of the new millennium is essentially a celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ in the city of Bethlehem. The message then was "Peace on Earth". This important and timeless message should be the central theme of the proposed Millennium Assembly.

The draft resolution before us speaks of the support of the international community for this initiative. Many of us are aware of the substantial financial contributions made or pledged towards making this event a success. My Government will, as in the past, consider what assistance it can give so that it too can contribute to this celebration. However, we reiterate our firm conviction that there can be no celebration without reconciliation and peace. This upcoming important commemoration of the birth of the messenger of peace will have no value if the peace process does not achieve the desired results. The

celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ should be the catalyst to further consolidate the peace process. Would it not be sad if the land of the nativity is still at war 2000 years after that momentous event?

We hope that our collective efforts will make a significant contribution towards fostering just and lasting peace in the region. In view of the importance and the significance of this draft resolution, my delegation looks forward to its adoption by consensus.

Mr. Shamsudin (Malaysia): My delegation fully supports the inclusion of item 157, entitled "Bethlehem 2000", in the agenda of the current session of the General Assembly. This discussion today is both relevant and timely. My delegation wishes to take this opportunity to commend the Bureau of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, under the chairmanship of Ambassador Ka of Senegal, for having made the effort to bring this important issue to the attention of the Assembly.

In the view of my delegation, Bethlehem 2000 is a noble project of peace. The planned commemoration of the two thousandth anniversary of the birth of the prophet Jesus, coinciding with the onset of the third millennium, deserves wide support. Bethlehem is one of the most historic and religiously significant sites on Earth, revered by the followers of great religions. As the birthplace of the great prophet, there can be no substitute for Bethlehem as the centre for this monumental event. There can be no better place than this Palestinian city, which has shone as a symbol of hope and peace for all peoples around the world to usher in the new millennium with greater hopes for peace, tolerance and justice for future generations of mankind.

My delegation fully supports the initiative by the Palestinian National Authority to honour the legacy of the prophet Jesus by celebrating his birth in Bethlehem. We firmly believe that the Bethlehem 2000 project should be a great event, a reminder to the international community of the message of peace and justice among mankind brought to us by the prophet Jesus and the other great prophets before and after him, including the prophet Mohammed. The commemorative event, which will stretch over a period of 16 months beginning at Christmas 1999, will focus on enduring religious precepts as well as broad, universal human values. We commend President Yasser Arafat for his leadership in the planning and preparation for the event.

The roots of every culture and civilization are indeed intertwined. This has been manifested in the arts, in the sciences and in philosophy; and if there exists today any misunderstanding and mistrust between cultures and beliefs, the Bethlehem 2000 project will provide the opportunity for everyone concerned to come together in a cross-cultural international effort to place things in the correct perspective. It is also an occasion to rebuild and reinforce bridges of trust, mutual understanding and mutually beneficial friendship and cooperation between peoples of various religions, cultures and nationalities, not just among those who are directly involved in the project, but also among the 2 million who are expected to visit Bethlehem to celebrate this historic occasion. We believe that this project will be one of those notable endeavours that will enable the international community to come together to face common challenges in the next millennium.

The Bethlehem 2000 project will underscore the need to restore justice and dignity to the people of Palestine, whose ongoing struggle for peace has endured over time despite the odds against them. Therefore, it is hoped that the project will help further spur the international community to push forward with renewed vigour the realization of the shared hopes for peace in the region. It is the duty of the international community to continue to put the question of Palestine in its correct perspective. The process by which the rights of the Palestinian people are to be realized, in particular the rights to self-determination, national sovereignty and independence, must be fully respected.

My delegation is happy to note that the necessary groundwork for the event has begun and that support has already been extended by various Governments and international agencies in this regard. We hope that all relevant actors will join in the efforts to ensure the success of the project. Malaysia, for its part, will lend the necessary support and assistance.

My delegation has co-sponsored the draft resolution submitted under this agenda item, as contained in document A/53/L.37. We hope it will have the unanimous support of the Assembly. The support of the international community for this initiative will be a great message of peace, not only to the people of Palestine and others in the region but also to the world at large.

Mr. Farhâdi (Afghanistan) (*interpretation from French*): The celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ will be important not only for Christians, but also for all

humanity as a whole, given the message of peace and love which will spread throughout the world.

The Islamic nations, including Afghanistan, have deep respect for this occasion, which commemorates an event blessed by God the Creator. That is the teaching of the Holy Koran, whose sura 19 is entitled "Maryam" — Mary, the mother of Jesus.

I am grateful to the Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, Ambassador Ka of Senegal, for quoting from that sura, in which Jesus says:

"So peace is on me the day I was born, the day that I die, and the day that I shall be raised up to life (again)!" (*The Holy Koran, XIX:33*)

In another sura, the Muslims express their faith in this way:

"The same religion has He established for you as that which He enjoined on Noah — that which We have sent by inspiration to Thee — and that which We enjoined on Abraham, Moses and Jesus: namely, that ye should remain steadfast in Religion, and make no divisions therein" (*ibid., XLII:13*).

As Muslims, we believe that Jesus represents an infinitely important milestone in this continuum of divine revelations. He is the messenger of the One God, as were Noah, Abraham and Moses. The miraculous birth of Jesus and his teachings are signs of divine grace. That is what the Holy Koran, revealed by God to the last of his messengers, teaches us in several passages.

The more than 1 billion Muslims worldwide belong to the faith of Abraham, the spiritual father of all believers. Muslims believe that the teachings of Jesus, like the teachings of the Prophet of Islam, are based on the same revelation as was given to Abraham and Moses.

Accordingly, we invite all nations of the world — out of spiritual solidarity with the many followers of the line of Abraham, who constitute a large part of the human race — to view Bethlehem 2000 as a commemorative occasion that is a source of great hope. It is thus quite clear that citizens of all nationalities must have free access to all of the holy places in Bethlehem.

We pay tribute to the Palestinian authorities for undertaking the colossal task of preparing for the events of Bethlehem 2000.

The draft resolution, as orally amended in the first preambular paragraph by the Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, should be adopted by consensus.

Mr. Rodríguez Parilla (Cuba) (*interpretation from Spanish*): As humankind prepares to embark upon a new millennium, any initiative that can in one way or another contribute to promoting the process of peace and reconciliation in the Middle East must receive unswerving support. Therefore, in the view of the Cuban delegation, the inclusion of a new item entitled "Bethlehem 2000" on the agenda of the fifty-third session of the General Assembly could not be more timely.

The question of Palestine is at a very complex juncture. Most of the Palestinian and other Arab territories occupied since 1967, including Jerusalem, are still under occupation. The territories under the jurisdiction of the Palestinian Authority remain fragmented, and some 3.5 million Palestinians still live in refugee camps, in precarious conditions.

The Bethlehem 2000 project, by promoting dialogue among all parties, could become a major catalyst on the road towards reconstruction, development and peace in the region. The city of Bethlehem is undoubtedly one of the most historically, culturally and religiously significant sites on earth. It is for that reason that we stressed, in the explanatory memorandum appended to the letter sent to the Secretary-General by the Bureau of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People recommending the inclusion of this new item 157 on the agenda, the importance of marking the advent of the year 2000 in Bethlehem as a major event, not only for the people of Palestine and the region but also for all believers worldwide and the international community as a whole. Project Bethlehem 2000 embodies possibilities that must be utilized fully, and the United Nations has a decisive role to play in this regard.

If we want the Bethlehem commemoration truly to lead to a process of reflection and action in the quest for a global ideal of hope and peace for all the peoples of the world, it is essential for the United Nations to give full and unrestricted support to this event. Several organs and programmes of the United Nations as well as intergovernmental organizations have already become

involved in preparations for the project through financial and technical contributions. These early efforts are commendable but cannot alone meet the challenge of Bethlehem 2000, particularly since some 2 million people are expected to visit the city in order to celebrate these historic events. The Bethlehem 2000 Participants Conference, held in Brussels on 11 and 12 May last, represents a first important step towards mobilizing international support for the project in its various aspects.

As yet another step towards this goal, Cuba firmly supports the holding of an international conference on Bethlehem 2000 next February in Rome. In order to ensure the conference's success, the United Nations, and especially the Committee on Palestine, must strive to achieve the largest possible international participation in it.

Regional efforts also must be enhanced towards the preparation and implementation of project Bethlehem 2000, as proposed by the Palestinian National Authority. A commendable example was the call by the Council of Ministers of the Organization of African Unity, at its June meeting, on its member States to support the project.

In Cuba's view, the draft resolution contained in document A/53/L.37, which we are considering today, represents the minimum basis for a consensus by Member States on project Bethlehem 2000. The absence of any controversial formulations in the text clearly shows that the co-sponsors are interested in trying to preserve consensus and to enable the General Assembly to send a message of unity with regard to this important initiative.

In concluding, let me urge all delegations resolutely to support and join the consensus on the draft resolution on Bethlehem 2000.

Mr. Zackheos (Cyprus): My Government has aligned itself with the statement made by the representative of Austria on behalf of the European Union. As a member of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, Cyprus welcomed the initiative to include the item entitled "Bethlehem 2000" in the agenda of the General Assembly and expresses its appreciation in particular to Ambassador Ka for his efforts to promote the project.

My Government sees in this initiative a message of hope and optimism, today more necessary than ever, in a world plagued by conflict and intolerance. We therefore fully endorse the decision of the Palestinian National Authority to celebrate the anniversary of the birth of Jesus

Christ, and we call for the strong practical support of the international community to make this project a big success.

This initiative comes at a crucial juncture in the evolution of the Middle East conflict, and we therefore hope that it will strengthen even further the forces of reconciliation and cooperation in that very sensitive region and will have a positive effect on the peace process on which the international community has placed so many hopes. The peace process is of the highest importance not only for the Palestinians and the Israelis but also for the future of peace throughout the region.

Throughout history, the eastern Mediterranean has been a cradle of civilizations and of coexistence between religions; it has been an important trade route and a strategic location of extreme significance. Cyprus, as an integral part of this area, believes that no effort should be spared in seeking a comprehensive, just and lasting peace on the basis of the relevant United Nations resolutions. We must grasp the opportunity presented by the breakthrough achieved in September 1993 with the signing of the Declaration of Principles and all subsequent agreements between the parties, since for the first time after years of conflict the people in the region have real prospects of finally seeing light at the end of the tunnel and can begin to dream of a peaceful and more prosperous future for themselves and for their families. In this respect, the Cyprus Government has welcomed the recent agreements reached at the Wye Plantation and expresses its hope that the deal will be fully implemented.

We hope that the Bethlehem 2000 anniversary celebration will also bring economic benefits to the Palestinian people, who need to see the practical results of the peace dividend since their economic prosperity is a necessary underpinning for lasting peace.

We sincerely hope that the United Nations as a whole will show concrete support for this historical occasion, thus affirming the engagement of the international community in a project of worldwide significance. The multidimensional character of the initiative, which combines religious, cultural and artistic celebrations and which is intended to bring together the believers of the world on the eve of the new millennium, makes this event a moment for peaceful coexistence, reflection, prosperity and hope for all mankind.

Indeed, in the year 2000 the past and the future will meet in Bethlehem in a commemoration that we hope will

usher in a new era during which we can all live together with respect for one another's culture and religion in a climate of international legality.

We in Cyprus are drawing inspiration from this event since we are also living with the vision of a free, united and demilitarized Cyprus without foreign troops, a Cyprus that is a member of the European family and where there is mutual respect between the two communities, in a democratic, multicultural and tolerant country.

Mr. Dlamini (Swaziland): My delegation fully welcomes the debate over this agenda item, entitled "Bethlehem 2000". The inclusion of such an item in the agenda is of paramount relevance to our times and, indeed, to all mankind. Allow me, therefore, to congratulate the members of the Bureau regarding this project on their insightfulness and the broad spiritual view displayed in their efforts to make Bethlehem 2000 a reality.

I would at the same time be remiss in my responsibilities if I did not offer special congratulations to the President of the Assembly on having assumed the presidency on behalf of his country at a time when this body, the United Nations, for the first time in history will debate an item of this nature.

Mr. Ortega Urbina (Nicaragua), Vice-President, took the Chair.

Bethlehem 2000 will remind us of the historical background and genesis of the events that took place in that part of the world. A child was born, as we all know, and he was given the name Jesus. The birth of this child shook the world, shook mankind. It shook kings of the earth, because they were worried that the child Jesus had come to overthrow their kingdoms. Even philosophers and scholars could not understand the birth of this child. Only the people who were inspired by God could understand what the birth of Jesus would lead to.

Agenda item 157 is intended yet again to bring the entire world to one place. This is not only to achieve the tourism aspects associated with the project; those like myself who are Christians will be pondering profoundly and thinking about the love of God that God has inspired in mankind.

In some circles and regions this child was subsequently called the Prophet, but on behalf of my delegation and my Government let me say that we call this child the Saviour of mankind. No other child in history

made the heavens shake when he died. No other child in history died and was buried but did not leave his bones in his grave.

The Bethlehem 2000 project, therefore, is associated with this mystery. We can go to the graves of all the prophets we have ever known; their bones are found there. But you can go to the grave of Jesus, whose birthday will be celebrated during this project, and his bones are not there. This is still a mystery. Today not a single scholar — either African or Western — can decipher or interpret this mystery. Only those who are respectful of God and imbued with the spirit from above can fully understand the connotations of Bethlehem 2000.

We are fortunate in today's world to be able to read about the end of time. It is clearly stated that the world will come together to honour and acknowledge Jesus — the very Jesus to whom I am referring today.

Who are the scholars who would call him a prophet? I call him, as my Bible dictates, not only the child who shook the world, but also the Saviour and Redeemer of mankind. This is the challenge to us all: what do we think of this Jesus? Do we still call him a prophet? Or do we call him the child that grew and at the age of 30 years died, and was resurrected on the third day?

Of all the prophets we can think of, how many died and were resurrected? The answer is, only Jesus. Only Jesus. I now challenge the world to ponder deeply, and I call upon the world to support all efforts leading towards this magnanimous project that will unite the world.

I still remember vividly when the wise men came from the east and proceeded to Bethlehem. They were carrying gifts, which they presented to the child Jesus. It would be in order for the world also to bear gifts as we proceed to the Bethlehem celebration in the year 2000.

I said earlier that the kings of this world were worried — King Herod being of those kings — so much so that along the way he interfered and tried to find out the secret. But the secret eluded him, because God had a special plan that the world should know about Jesus and that Jesus could not die as an infant.

We are lucky, therefore, that in the course of history, you, Mr. President, have presided over the debate on this historic project relating also to your life; you will under no circumstances be able to say that you have never had the time to hear about all the events associated with

Jesus. This is Jesus Christ, who died and was resurrected, whom the world should regard as an answer — whom the United Nations itself should regard as the answer to all the problems that are besetting humankind.

Mr. Kolby (Norway): Bethlehem is one of the most historic and religiously significant sites on earth. The celebration of the 2,000th anniversary of the birth of Jesus Christ and the onset of the new millennium is of monumental importance — not only for the Palestinian people and for the region, but also for the believers of the world and for the international community as a whole.

Norway has warmly welcomed the Bethlehem 2000 project, which was initiated by the Palestinian Authority, the municipality of Bethlehem and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. The project is an ambitious programme of cultural and religious celebration, urban and economic rejuvenation and tourist development and promotion.

Norway also welcomes the call for strong and increased international assistance to and engagement in the project.

Norway views Bethlehem 2000 as an opportunity to broaden the donor nations' commitment to reconciliation and peace in the Middle East. It is also an opportunity to focus on the reconstruction and development efforts for the Palestinians. We appreciate that the World Bank and the United Nations Development Programme also are making important contributions to the Bethlehem 2000 project, with regard to rehabilitation in the Old City, as well as in neighbouring municipalities.

At the Bethlehem 2000 Participants Conference in Brussels in May, Norway pledged \$3 million in 1998 to the Bethlehem 2000 project. In addition, we take a positive stance towards considering additional funding. The Norwegian support will be channelled to the energy sector, rehabilitation of the Old City and to road rehabilitation.

Mr. Al-Sindi (Yemen) (*interpretation from Arabic*): First of all, I wish to congratulate the President most warmly on his efforts in connection with organizing the work of this session. I would also express my appreciation for the wise manner in which he has presided with a view to ensuring success here.

The importance attached to agenda item 157, "Bethlehem 2000", before the General Assembly today, reflects the great interest of the international community in

this project, considering that the Palestinian city of Bethlehem is the birthplace of Jesus Christ. My delegation would associate itself with all those who have sponsored this draft resolution. We believe in the importance of supporting the organization of these celebrations, which will begin at Christmas 1999 and conclude at Easter 2001. We would invite the Secretary-General to undertake efforts to ensure the success of the event.

We believe that the whole world's commemoration of this event is a decisive turning point. It is transition from one era — an era of injustice, hegemony and occupation — to a new era of freedom, hope and peace.

The success of this project will help to ensure freedom of access for believers of every religion so that they may all participate in the festivities in Bethlehem, Palestine, considered to be one of the most important and historic religious sites. The commemoration of the event will generate real change on the ground, especially with respect to freedom of movement as a symbol of hope for peace for all peoples of the world.

My delegation looks forward to the adoption by consensus of the draft resolution on the Bethlehem 2000 project.

Mr. Abdel Aziz (Egypt) (*interpretation from Arabic*): In less than two years, Christians throughout the world and all peace-loving peoples will commemorate the birth of Jesus Christ 2,000 years ago in the historic Palestinian city of Bethlehem.

The commemoration of that event is of historic, religious and cultural significance, not only to the Palestinian people and the region, but also to the entire world. The commemoration in the city of Bethlehem will draw together peoples, religious authorities, individuals and institutions from every corner of the world under one banner: the banner of solidarity, tolerance, coexistence and hope. This will certainly reflect the message of peace brought by Jesus Christ to the entire world — a peace which we are trying to establish in the Middle East.

My delegation is aware of the intense efforts being made by the Palestinian authorities to prepare for this major commemoration. Undoubtedly, the support of the United Nations, its specialized agencies and Member States will have an enormous effect on the success of the festivities. These festivities require, *inter alia*, the restoration of the city's infrastructure, including water,

electricity and sanitation services, and the improvement of other basic services. This would include social, medical, security, police and emergency services. Furthermore, these preparations would also include plans to provide tourist services to the 2 million people expected to come to Bethlehem to commemorate this historic event.

In this context, Egypt wishes to express its gratitude for the support that has already been offered by the international community to the Bethlehem 2000 project. We trust that this support will continue with the participation of the international private sector at the international level. We also hope that the Secretary-General will mobilize and coordinate the support of the relevant specialized agencies of the United Nations system. We call on the Israeli authorities to be flexible and to ensure the establishment of circumstances conducive to the channelling of the necessary support to the officials in charge of these festivities by guaranteeing freedom of movement and access to the holy places in Bethlehem. We also express the hope that the peace process will continue on the right track, thus ensuring a just, lasting and comprehensive peace in order to create the appropriate peaceful atmosphere in which the commemoration can take place.

The draft resolution before us today reflects the interest of the international community in this noble undertaking. It also conveys the keen interest of its sponsors in its adoption by consensus as a reflection of the desire of all parties to provide an appropriate climate for the celebration in Bethlehem of the year 2000. Moreover, we support the inclusion of the item entitled "Bethlehem 2000" in the agenda of the fifty-fourth session of the General Assembly, which will allow us to monitor measures taken in preparation for the commemoration.

In conclusion, I wish to say that Egypt is proud to have become a sponsor of this draft resolution, and to emphasize that the Government and religious and cultural institutions of Egypt will work to ensure the success of the Bethlehem 2000 project and will participate in a manner reflecting our interest in that great commemoration, confirming its religious and cultural significance to our region and the entire world.

Mr. Guillén (Peru) (*interpretation from Spanish*): It is an honour for the delegation of Peru to speak on and co-sponsor draft resolution A/53/L.37, introduced by the representative of Senegal.

We are participating in this debate because of the symbolic and spiritual nature of this item. We do not

believe that the name Bethlehem suggests a central place in the world that excludes the sacred character of the faiths professed by many other peoples. This gesture requires profound and mutual respect between the faiths professed by all peoples, because this Organization was founded by its peoples, and the peoples of today's world cherish syncretism and mutual understanding.

This tribute is a tribute to the humble quality of that place, according to history or tradition. It is a tribute, too, to the fragility of those who sought refuge in their vulnerability to the power of the greatest empire of that era.

For all these reasons, Peru will always affirm the basic importance of freedom of access to sacred sites. We believe, however, that the best tribute to this commemoration will certainly be the urgent completion of agreements for peace and reconciliation in that region.

The Acting President (*interpretation from Spanish*): In accordance with the decision taken earlier, I now call on the Observer for the Holy See.

Archbishop Martino (Holy See): With its initial explanatory memorandum, the Bureau of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People asked for the inclusion of this item in the agenda of the fifty-third session of the General Assembly, noting:

"Bethlehem, Palestine, is one of the most historic and religiously significant sites on earth. In the year 2000, the past and the future will meet in Bethlehem in a global vision of hope and peace for all peoples. On that occasion, the world will celebrate the two thousandth anniversary of the birth of Jesus Christ and the onset of the new millennium." (A/53/141, annex)

The Holy See welcomes this noble initiative and expresses its sincere gratitude to the authors.

Indeed, in the crossroads of history, Bethlehem marks the meeting point of past, present and future. This is because the one born there, Jesus, laid the foundation for a civilization of love and peace, a love which requires self-giving and a peace which is founded on each human person's relationship with God and with one another. It was this love and peace for which the Psalmist prayed:

“Kindness and truth shall meet; justice and peace shall kiss. Truth shall spring out of the earth and justice shall look down from heaven.” (*The Holy Bible, Psalm 85:10-11*)

It was the peace the prophet Isaiah foretold:

“they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.” (*Ibid., Isaiah 2:4*)

Bethlehem was the fulfilment of the expectations of history, but at the same time it was also the start of a new era in history.

In this light, Bethlehem is more than a distant city tucked away in the Judean wilderness. It becomes a universal message for the human family to live in peace and harmony. Bethlehem is not only a city of holy places but also of people trying to live their lives like any other. It is a city with markets and schools, shops and gardens, universities and shepherds’ fields. It is a city where people build their lives, with hopes and dreams to be respected and nurtured, just as the hopes and dreams of every person, in every city, town, village, hamlet or crossroads in every corner of the world must be respected. In a sense, Bethlehem is every city, every town, every home.

Peoples and families have made their home in Bethlehem for centuries, and they look forward to the opportunity to remain in their homeland, to watch their children’s children grow and prosper.

It is a familiar place dear to our hearts, and because of this specialness it attracts pilgrims from across the globe.

My delegation takes the floor today to recognize and celebrate the history and the future of this little town that is such an important symbol for so many people.

It all started in a humble and simple environment. Bethlehem itself was not until then a remarkable city in the mainstream of history. Those who were called to be the real human actors in the Christ-event were neither the mighty nor the rich. They were, in some way, the marginalized of society. His mother declared herself a “lowly handmaid” and his foster father was a carpenter. The manger in Bethlehem, which became the birthplace of Jesus Christ, was at once a symbol of man’s rejection of God and God’s acceptance of man. Not royalty, but shepherds were the first beneficiaries of the message of “peace to people of

good will”. The wise men from afar, willing to bow their heads to cross the stable’s threshold to obtain a glimpse of the child “wrapped in swaddling clothes”, were the ones blessed by his presence and filled with the peace of God. Bethlehem signalled a new way of uniting humanity to God, heaven to Earth and Earth to heaven; man’s history began to be written in the language of love.

Jesus came to reveal a “God rich in mercy” (*ibid., Ephesians 2:4*) to a world where mercy was a forgotten virtue and compassion an unpractised act. The society in whose midst he stood was divided into ranks and levels. The poor and lowly had no guarantee to their rights, the oppressed had no voice and the imprisoned were deprived of their liberty. Fulfilling the prophetic message, he pronounced his first public statement:

“The Spirit of the Lord has sent me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty the oppressed” (*Ibid., Luke 4:18*)

That was, in essence, a divine proclamation of the dignity of every human person. Since then that message, of which Bethlehem was the cradle, has unceasingly inspired human history.

The message of Jesus was identified with his person as he identified himself with every human person, especially the weak and the poor. He could identify himself with the displaced and the refugees, because he was himself a displaced person and a refugee. As a manual labourer, he shared the fatigue and sweat of the working people. Being himself a person unjustly condemned to unbearable suffering, he renewed his commitment to stand with every human person forced to bear injustice and oppression. By giving his life for others, he became the source of strength and salvation. To those who believe, his resurrection became an unending fountain of fullness of life and his perennial presence a source of constant joy. For this reason, in subsequent centuries literature and art have been inspired by and have celebrated his person and message. Jesus of Nazareth transformed human history and gave it a new meaning because he redefined the human person and restored his dignity.

Even today, Jesus remains an inviting impetus and an unceasing reminder, offering and urging a constructive change in the hearts of individuals and of the entire human family. He calls for a renewed conviction in the inalienable dignity of every human person. The two

thousandth year of his birth in Bethlehem is a propitious occasion to rekindle trust in a human family united in fellowship and solidarity, devoid of any greed for power and conquest. Society is under constant threat from man's deeds, a threat which might destroy mankind.

Man suffers under self-made chains of consumerism and permissiveness, and he blindly pursues a culture of death and destruction. Everything in the universe, it seems, is revalued and redefined, while the human person, who is the culmination of all creation, undergoes an exaggerated depreciation and contempt. God's truth about man can liberate us from egoism and self-inflicted slavery. Love, without strings and limits, should impel us to build a new society. In this process of self-awareness and renewal, the message of Bethlehem, after two thousand years and in spite of bitter failures and shortcomings, even by the very followers of Christ, remains crucially important and universally appealing.

Falsehoods and facades, hypocrisy and self-righteousness, megalomania and self-centredness all lead to conflict and violence and are opposed to the Christ-event of Bethlehem. His example is an invitation to humility and selflessness, goodness and generosity, forgiveness and acceptance. Then the history of conflicts and wars, hatred and oppression, power politics and hegemony can give way to a new millennium that exemplifies harmony and love, brotherhood and solidarity.

At the threshold of the third millennium, Bethlehem inspires us with new hope. We can read in it a universal message, addressed to its inhabitants and to all people of the world, calling them to commit themselves to preserve and share the precious gifts of peace.

Peace will become a reality if we enter the new millennium as people of good will. The wounds of the past can be healed if love is understood and lived to the fullest. Human destiny will be brighter and more promising when solidarity becomes a principle accepted by all. Above all, the new millennium could be distinguished by its respect for life and for the dignity of the human person.

The delegation of the Holy See avails itself of this occasion to renew to the entire world the message of Bethlehem. Let Bethlehem be a living witness to the message of peace which Jesus brought at his birth. This message, announcing the courage to forgive, the strength to love and the hope to live, extends in a special way to the people of Bethlehem and of the entire region.

The Acting President (*interpretation from Spanish*): We have heard the last speaker in the debate on this item. At the request of the sponsors, I should now like to consult the Assembly with a view to considering immediately the draft resolution contained in document A/53/L.37, as orally revised. In this connection, since the document has been circulated only this morning, it would be necessary to waive the relevant provision of rule 78 of the rules of procedure, which reads as follows:

“As a general rule, no proposal shall be discussed or put to the vote at any meeting of the General Assembly unless copies of it have been circulated to all delegations not later than the day preceding the meeting.”

Unless I hear any objections, I will take it that the Assembly agrees to waive the relevant provision of rule 78.

It was so decided.

The Acting President (*interpretation from Spanish*): The Assembly will now take a decision on draft resolution A/53/L.37, as orally revised.

Before taking action on the draft resolution, I am pleased to announce that since it was introduced we have had additions to the list of sponsors, namely: Argentina, Bahrain, Belarus, Benin, Costa Rica, El Salvador, France, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Portugal, Peru, the Russian Federation, Spain, Vanuatu.

May I take it that the Assembly decides to adopt draft resolution A/53/L.37, as orally revised?

Draft resolution A/53/L.37, as orally revised, was adopted (resolution 53/27).

The President returned to the Chair.

The President (*interpretation from Spanish*): Before giving the floor to speakers in explanation of vote after the vote, may I remind delegations that explanations of vote are limited to 10 minutes and should be made by delegations from their seats.

Mr. Gold (Israel): Israel embraces the opportunity to host a historic in gathering of Christian pilgrims, marking two thousand years since the birth of Jesus in the ancient land then known as Judea. The Israeli Government, through its newly founded 2000 Authority,

has spent the past few years eagerly laying the groundwork for this event. It has invested close to a billion dollars and launched a variety of projects, tours, travel and hotel plans with one goal: to make this event as meaningful and rewarding as possible for the Christian pilgrims.

This follows in a proud tradition of promoting religious freedom in Israel. As a group which was persecuted for centuries over our own religious expression and denied access to our most cherished holy sites by successive empires that occupied our land, the Jewish people feels strongly the need to protect the religious rights of all peoples. Since the establishment of the State of Israel, we have enabled all groups to enjoy, without limit, the benefits of the holy places in our jurisdiction, making these sites freer and more accessible than they have been in two millennia. This principle continued to be applied after 1967, as well. The Christian community, for example, has enjoyed unlimited rights of religious activity, fulfilment and control in the holy sites of Jerusalem and Nazareth and elsewhere throughout the country.

Bethlehem 2000 is no exception. We have started plans for improving transportation and lodging, among other things, to enhance the Bethlehem 2000 experience. Israel stands fully ready to cooperate with the Christian and Arab communities in this endeavour. In particular, we have proposed joint measures with the Palestinian Authority and have contributed hundreds of thousands of dollars to improve the conditions of the Bethlehem area. We now await their agreement to cooperate.

We find it most unfortunate, therefore, that this universally inspiring occasion has been tainted by political agendas that advance the interests of one side at the expense of the other and of the peace process as a whole. But for a few unfortunate phrases and some unfortunate terminology, this resolution could have reflected the universal importance of the event and received unqualified support. Instead, a purely religious occasion has been cynically manipulated in order to advance a narrow political interest.

We also regret that this divisive politicization was part of an initiative advanced by the Palestinian Observer Mission. Although it is clear to all that Israeli-Palestinian cooperation on the ground is essential for the project's success, cooperation in drafting this resolution was not even considered. That makes it unfortunate on two counts. First, the Oslo and Wye agreements specifically require that permanent status issues be addressed in bilateral negotiations between the parties. Secondly, this initiative

stands in direct contradiction to the commitment given by the Palestine Liberation Organization at Wye to refrain from taking steps that change the status of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Clearly, the struggle over the nomenclature used in this resolution is part of an effort to advance a unilateral alternative to a negotiated settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

It is our hope that the spirit of cooperation between peoples and religions, reflected in our joint plans for the year 2000, will prevail over the narrow interests advanced here. That is why Israel joined the consensus. Peoples are often tested by their ability to transcend their particular interests in the service of a universal good. Unfortunately, the experience of this resolution proves that the very opposite has occurred.

The President (*interpretation from Spanish*): We have heard the only speaker in explanation of vote.

Mr. Al-Kidwa (Palestine) (*interpretation from Arabic*): There is no need for me to point out that the statement we have just heard runs counter to the general trend that prevailed here today. We remain convinced, however, that the best option is not to spoil the general and valuable consensus that prevailed at this meeting and that led to the adoption by consensus of this important resolution, entitled "Bethlehem 2000". Consequently, we will not respond to the many errors in the statement that we have just heard.

The President (*interpretation from Spanish*): May I take it that it is the wish of the General Assembly to conclude its consideration of agenda item 157?

It was so decided.

Agenda item 44

The situation in Central America: procedures for the establishment of a firm and lasting peace and progress in fashioning a region of peace, freedom, democracy and development

Reports of the Secretary-General (A/53/288, A/53/315, A/53/421 and Corr.1)

Draft resolutions (A/53/L.20, A/53/L.22/Rev.2)

The President (*interpretation from Spanish*): I call on the representative of Mexico to introduce draft

resolution A/53/L.20.

Mr. Albin (Mexico) (*interpretation from Spanish*): It is an honour for the delegation of Mexico to introduce the draft resolution contained in document A/53/L.20. In addition to the countries listed, which make up the Group of Friends of the Guatemala peace process, the draft resolution is sponsored by Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, the Russian Federation, Sweden and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

The preambular part of the draft resolution refers to the resolution adopted by the Assembly last year and to the various reports submitted by the Secretary-General. It mentions the progress and the efforts of the parties and of Guatemalan society in support of the Peace Agreements, stressing the role played by the United Nations Verification Mission in Guatemala (MINUGUA) in support of the peace process. It acknowledges the support of the international community and recalls the request of the parties with regard to the duration of the mandate of the Mission.

After taking note of the reports submitted to the Assembly, the operative part of the draft resolution welcomes the progress made in implementing the Peace Agreements, in particular the recently adopted constitutional reforms, and stresses the need to ensure their broad acceptance in the upcoming referendum.

The sponsors are aware of the problems that may arise in organizing the voting process because of the damage caused by hurricane Mitch. However, we are confident that the authorities and society at large will take the measures necessary to carry out that process as soon as possible so as not to affect the scheduled verification timetable.

The draft also underscores the importance of further complying with the commitments set out in the peace agreements, particularly on issues identified as priorities. It calls upon the parties to implement fully the commitments they entered into in the Comprehensive Agreement on Human Rights and those in the other peace agreements, in particular those contained in the third phase of the Implementation, Compliance and Verification Timetable for the Peace Agreements, and to remain committed to the goals of those agreements, particularly during the 1999 electoral period. The sponsors hope that all the political forces participating in the electoral process will comply with the commitments which stem from the peace agreements.

The draft stresses the importance for the international community to continue its support for the peace process, especially through voluntary contributions to the Trust Fund for Guatemala established by the Secretary-General. This appeal is particularly crucial in the dramatic context which stems from the impact of hurricane Mitch. The sponsors appeal to Member States and all international organizations and institutions to be generous in their contributions.

Finally, the draft resolution proposes that the General Assembly decide to renew the mandate of the Mission from 1 January to 31 December 1999, requesting the Secretary-General to submit a report with his recommendations with regard to the Mission after 31 December 1999 to the General Assembly at its fifty-fourth session and that he keep the Assembly fully informed of the implementation of the resolution.

Confrontation and uncertainty seem to be the hallmark of the international situation of our time. In contrast, the Guatemalan peace process is working and working well, thereby attesting to the courage and determination of a people yearning for peace, reconciliation and development. The sponsors trust that the General Assembly will appreciate the significance and magnitude of these efforts and will be unanimous in its early adoption of the draft resolution which I have had the honour to introduce.

The President (*interpretation from Spanish*): I call on the representative of Guatemala to introduce draft resolution A/53/L.22/Rev.2.

Mr. Rosenthal (Guatemala) (*interpretation from Spanish*): It is my pleasure to introduce, on behalf of the sponsors, who have now been joined by Brazil, Canada, Haiti, Jamaica, Japan and Paraguay, draft resolution A/53/L.22/Rev.2, submitted under agenda item 44.

If I may be allowed a personal remark, I should like to mention that this is my first statement before the General Assembly since assuming my duties as Permanent Representative of my country only two weeks ago, so this is an event of special significance for me.

It is also a moment of mixed emotions. On the one hand, it is impossible to speak today of Central America without thinking of the natural disaster that ravaged the region at the end of October. Our attention is still riveted on the tasks of relief, emergency assistance, rehabilitation and reconstruction in what can only be described as a

most distressing situation, measured in terms of human and material losses, especially in the case of Honduras and Nicaragua. Indeed, the progress achieved in previous decades with regard to development will have suffered a setback or perhaps even be wiped out as a consequence of the damage inflicted on the productive capacity and physical infrastructure of the countries of the region.

On the other hand, however, we have before us a paradoxical but undeniable fact: the evolution of Central America in the 15 years since this topic first appeared on the agenda of the General Assembly can be characterized as a remarkable success story — a success story of the Central Americans, because to a large extent it was their own work, and a success story of international cooperation and of our Organization — the United Nations.

Allow me, therefore, to stress this positive aspect, which is unfortunately now clouded over by a fortuitous event, one which we will also overcome with time. The best analogy here would be the comparison of two snapshots: one of Central America in 1983, and the other in 1998.

In the first snapshot, there were serious civil conflicts in three countries which disturbed the peace in the entire region. With the notable exception of Costa Rica, authoritarian regimes, accompanied by a culture of intolerance and impunity, prevailed in the region. The most elementary human rights were often violated. The economies were undergoing their worst financial crisis since the 1930s, which was reflected in an abrupt drop in the real income of most of the population. The high level of economic interdependence which was so laboriously achieved in previous decades under the aegis of the Central American Common Market quickly gave way to fragmentation.

In the second snapshot, the armed conflicts have been overcome. Formal peace accords signed in El Salvador have, to a large extent, been implemented, while in the case of Guatemala they are generally on track. And even more important is the fact that the Nicaraguans, Salvadorans and Guatemalans are well along on the path of reconciliation. In the entire region, not only do we see a consolidation of more pluralistic and participatory political regimes, but a truly democratic culture, one with respect for human rights, is gradually taking root. The economies have been on a recovery path since the beginning of this decade, with growth rates which may as yet be unsatisfactory and which still have serious shortfalls for most sectors of the population, but nevertheless ultimately this is a recovery. In

that context, intraregional trade has notably increased and Central American integration has received a new impetus which stems from decisions taken at the very highest political level.

The contrast between the two snapshots could not be sharper. In spite of all the problems which the countries of the region are still confronting — and there are many — the ground covered since 1983 puts them in a far superior situation. These achievements, to be sure, are clouded by the recent catastrophe, but even so it can be stated that Central America is today in a much better position to meet the new challenges of rehabilitation and reconstruction than it was barely a decade ago.

Although the achievements I have mentioned were no doubt facilitated by the dramatic changes in the international climate — and especially by the end of the East-West conflict that had caused such woe in Central America — it is only fair to stress that it was basically the Central Americans themselves who provided leadership in the process of pacification, democratization and development. I refer both to Governments and to civil societies. It is no accident in this regard that two illustrious Central Americans, Mr. Oscar Arias Sánchez and Ms. Rigoberta Menchú Tum, were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in the short span of five years. Thus, a decade on, the course charted in the August 1987 Esquipulas II accord on “Procedures for the establishment of a firm and lasting peace in Central America” has essentially been traversed.

I also mentioned the importance of international cooperation — from the pioneering efforts of the Contadora Group, soon expanded to the Rio Group, to the bilateral support provided by important outside actors on the Central American stage; from the equally pioneering mechanism of the groups of friends that accompanied the various peace negotiations to the irreplaceable role of the United Nations in the various stages of producing the second snapshot. To all this we must add the economic and financial cooperation provided by the bilateral and multilateral institutions, which has been so decisive in the economic recovery experienced throughout this decade.

Yet the task was far from accomplished. After all, the creation of a region of peace, freedom, democracy and development in Central America is a very long-term endeavour, to which we must now add the task of rehabilitation and reconstruction. It is for this reason that we have submitted draft resolution A/53/L.22/Rev.2 for consideration by the General Assembly; it draws on the

idea that we are dealing with a long-term process. That process must be undertaken first and foremost by all Central Americans, but it also requires the continued support and solidarity of the international community in general and of the United Nations in particular. It is entirely appropriate, then, to continue monitoring this process, highlighting both its achievements and its shortcomings. That is the aim of the draft resolution now before the Assembly.

Mr. Sucharipa (Austria): I have the honour to speak on behalf of the European Union. In addition, the Central and Eastern European countries associated with the European Union — Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia — and the associated country Cyprus, as well as the European Free Trade Association countries members of the European Economic Area Iceland and Liechtenstein, align themselves with this statement.

The European Union recognizes with great satisfaction that all countries of Central America are under democratic rule today. They have all entered a promising period of their history and have truly made progress in establishing and promoting a firm and lasting peace.

We are grateful to the Secretary-General for providing us with excellent, detailed reports on the situation in Central America and on the United Nations Verification Mission in Guatemala. These reports show that a lot has been done in the past few years, but also that there are still obstacles and difficulties on the road to the full consolidation of Central America's recent achievements.

Let me on this occasion express our deepest sorrow and regret at the massive loss of human life and the destruction of human settlements, infrastructure and economic and ecological resources caused only recently by hurricane Mitch. The devastating effects of that natural disaster have in particular caused enormous suffering to poor and vulnerable communities. The international community will have to show strong solidarity with the affected countries and provide them with assistance for comprehensive rehabilitation and reconstruction. This will also be necessary in order to allow regular development activities to continue. With regard to emergency relief, we would like to commend the United Nations bodies and programmes concerned for their quick response and their swift action.

The European Union has decided to allocate immediate assistance to the victims of the storm, amounting

to a total of ECU 100 million — \$117 million — from the Union's member States and from the European Community budget. Furthermore, high-ranking delegations of the European Commission and of European Union member States are travelling to the region to evaluate the immediate needs in terms of humanitarian aid. The Commission also intends to present an action plan on the European Union's contribution to the rehabilitation and reconstruction of the most severely affected countries.

The European Union has supported international and regional efforts in the search for a negotiated peace in Central America from their very start, including the endeavours of the Contadora Group, set up in 1983, the Esquipulas process, which began in 1986, and the Esquipulas II peace treaty on "Procedures for the establishment of a firm and lasting peace in Central America" of 1987. The San José dialogue, in which the Central American countries and the European Union have been engaged since 1984, has undoubtedly accelerated the emergence of the Central American initiative for a negotiated settlement.

Our political support for the countries of Central America has always been complemented by substantial assistance in the humanitarian field as well as in the sphere of development and economic cooperation. Throughout the times of war, the European Union was the principal aid donor to Central American refugees, displaced and repatriated persons and demobilized fighters.

Once peace had returned to Nicaragua and El Salvador, the European Union was one of the main sponsors of reconciliation and reconstruction in those countries. The Union also provides extensive support for the peace process in Guatemala, where ECU 200 million — \$234 million — have been allocated for the period from 1997 to 2000 to give assistance in the demobilization and reintegration of personnel of the Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca and the army, in the legal protection of property and the establishment of a national land register, in the process of decentralizing and strengthening local government, in the establishment of a civilian national police force and in improving the administration of justice and the taxation system.

This leads me to the current situation in Guatemala. Almost two years have passed since the Peace Agreements were signed, and the European Union commends the Guatemalan people, its constitutional and

political representatives and all sectors of civil society on their efforts to implement them.

In particular, we welcome the recent approval in Congress of constitutional reforms. We hope that a referendum will soon be held to endorse them by popular vote. We encourage the State and society of Guatemala to continue the process towards the full implementation of the peace accords. Their active commitment to the goals of the accords is imperative, not least with respect to the upcoming election period.

The European Union believes that the accords bind all Guatemalans and strongly encourages all sectors to contribute to the achievement of their targets, in particular in the socio-economic fields. The attainment of the major fiscal goals and progress towards the implementation of the recent agreement on a more equitable tax system will be considered important indicators for Guatemala's commitment to the peace process. While recognizing positive developments, we also hope for further progress regarding land issues.

The European Union deplores the fact that serious law and order problems continue to imperil citizens' security in Guatemala. We are concerned about unresolved cases of violent crimes, in particular the still unresolved murder of Bishop Gerardi, and human rights violations. The Union calls upon the competent authorities of Guatemala to renew efforts to ensure a full investigation and to bring those responsible to justice. We believe that strengthening the judicial power will be crucial to end impunity and to guarantee the rule of law. The European Union also calls upon the Government of Guatemala to continue to support the work of the *comisión de la verdad* and to take all appropriate measures to ensure the safety of its members.

All this being said, the European Union strongly supports the indispensable work and activities of the United Nations Verification Mission in Guatemala (MINUGUA), whose primary function is to ensure the full implementation of the peace accords in a period of four years, which started in 1997. MINUGUA remains at the centre of international efforts to strengthen confidence in the consolidation of peace in Guatemala. Last year, we welcomed and supported the Mission's restructuring and strengthening. We note with satisfaction that this has enhanced MINUGUA's ability to carry out its complex mandate.

Let me take this opportunity to commend the members of the Mission for their valuable work. Furthermore, I would like to pay tribute to the six members of the Mission

and the pilot who lost their lives in a helicopter crash on 17 March this year. Their tragic end reminds us of the hardship and risks which those who participate in United Nations missions often face while carrying out their tasks and of the courage and dedication needed for work in the field.

As to El Salvador, the European Union recognizes that further advances have been made in the implementation of outstanding elements of the 1992 peace agreements, in particular with regard to the Land Transfer Programme. In other fields, however, certain obstacles to the implementation of pending issues remain. In this connection, may I just mention the rural settlement programme and the problems faced by relatives of deceased combatants who did not appear in the original 1993 census.

Furthermore, we hope for further progress regarding respect for and protection and promotion of human rights. In this connection, we would like to stress the importance of an impartial and active role for the human rights ombudsman. Furthermore, the European Union wishes to underline that in the field of public security, and in particular with regard to the national civilian police, efforts to implement necessary reforms must continue. In general, we consider it imperative to sustain the gains of the peace process and consolidate the institutions it created.

The European Union therefore strongly supports United Nations efforts to foster the consolidation of the peace-building process in El Salvador. We take note of the closure of the relevant service unit within the structure of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) despite the fact that some aspects of the peace accords are still to be implemented. We support the proposal made by the Secretary-General to entrust UNDP with the necessary follow-up to these matters, in consultation with donor Governments, while the Organization's good-offices functions will continue to be carried out by the United Nations Secretariat in coordination with UNDP.

At the XIV Ministerial Conference on political dialogue and economic cooperation between the countries of the European Union and the Member States of the Central American Integration System — which was held in San José, Costa Rica, on 10 and 11 February this year — the Union reaffirmed its will to continue cooperating with the region in order to help consolidate its full development. The San José dialogue has continued to contribute decisively to the efforts of the Central

American countries in making the processes of peace and democracy in the area irreversible, to full respect for human rights and basic freedoms, to promoting the development of the most vulnerable sections of the population and to consolidating regional integration.

The XIV Ministerial Conference welcomed the consolidation of Central America as a region of peace and democracy and recognized the efforts made by the Central American countries to guarantee the security of the population. In this context, the Union reiterated its willingness to reinforce its cooperation with relevant Central American initiatives, in particular regarding the training of civilian police and the development of better relations between citizens and civilian police through information and dialogue.

Over recent years, the European Union and Central America have tightened their links and developed a rich network of relations. While reaffirming our support for the activities of the United Nations in the region, we also look forward to an intensified cooperation and dialogue with Central America in the United Nations framework, based on shared values and common views on subjects of global importance.

Mr. Kolby (Norway): I would like to begin by expressing my deepest sympathy to the Governments and the peoples of Central America for the losses and suffering inflicted on them by the devastation wrought by hurricane Mitch. We were distressed to receive the news of so many deaths and such extensive damage. The survivors face the huge task of rebuilding their countries. The support of the international community is vital if the consequences of this unimaginable disaster are to be limited. It is therefore of crucial importance that the international community continue to show solidarity and support for the countries of Central America as they start the long struggle to repair the havoc of which they are the innocent victims. Apart from immediate emergency assistance, Norway is willing to contribute to the establishment of a multilateral debt trust fund.

As a former member of the Group of Friends of the Guatemalan peace process, Norway wishes first and foremost to pay tribute to the Government and the people of Guatemala for what they have achieved in the implementation of the Peace Agreements. Not least among these achievements is the importance of the constitutional reforms that were adopted by Congress a few weeks ago. These reforms consolidate Guatemala's position as a multi-ethnic, multicultural and multilingual nation, with equal

rights and opportunities for everyone. For the further implementation of the Peace Agreements it is crucial that the constitutional reforms receive the necessary support from the people in the forthcoming referendum. We strongly urge the Guatemalan Government and people to stand together behind the proposed reforms and to ensure the broadest possible participation in the referendum, if necessary with the help of the international community. Norway is prepared to provide assistance by promoting the genuine participation of all sectors of Guatemalan society during the forthcoming elections, in 1999.

Norway wishes to pay tribute to the Guatemalan Government for the agreement it has concluded with civil society to prepare a package of tax reforms that will ensure revenues of 12 per cent of the gross domestic product by the year 2002, as laid down in the agreement. Such reforms are a precondition for the implementation of the rest of the peace agreements, and their significance must not be underestimated. Norway therefore strongly urges the parties involved to give priority to efforts to achieve the minimum level of tax revenues by 2002, as defined in the Peace Agreement.

The agreement establishing a Clarification Commission was concluded in Oslo in June 1994. The Commission will present its report in January 1999. We urge the Guatemalan Government to make binding commitments on the basis of the recommendations of the report. Norway has been one of the main supporters of the Commission's work, and we are also prepared to support the efforts to follow up the report's conclusions.

Norway has undertaken to support the implementation of the Peace Agreements in Guatemala to the amount of 100 million Norwegian kroner every year throughout the implementation period — 1996 to 2000. This includes being one of the major contributors to the United Nations Verification Mission in Guatemala (MINUGUA), whose presence and participation in the implementation process we consider to be of the greatest importance. I would like to take this opportunity to emphasize the significance of Jean Arnault's efforts as director of MINUGUA and of the professional way in which MINUGUA's mandate has been implemented. The importance of extending MINUGUA's mandate to cover the same period as the implementation of the peace agreements must not be underestimated, and Norway therefore supports the draft resolution on the extension of MINUGUA's mandate until 31 December 1999.

The work of implementing the Peace Agreements in Guatemala has now reached its third and perhaps most demanding phase. It is now that the foundation will be laid for a nation with equal rights and opportunities for all, as set out in the Agreements. We urge Guatemala to stand united behind the changes that are needed in order to achieve the ambitious goals of the Peace Agreements and to make this a national task, irrespective of political or sociocultural affiliation. On behalf of the Norwegian Government, I would like to emphasize Norway's willingness to follow up and support Guatemala in its efforts to implement the peace agreements.

Mr. Sharma (India): My delegation is happy to take the floor to speak for the first time on the situation in Central America. India's engagement in Central America has increased manifold in recent years and, as a reflection of our abiding commitment to strengthening relations with countries in the region, I am taking this opportunity to share with the general membership our perspective on the evolving situation in Central America.

We have read with great interest the report of the Secretary-General on the situation in Central America contained in document A/53/315, covering developments relating to progress achieved by countries in the region in the areas of peace, freedom, democracy and development. In recent years Central America has witnessed a remarkable transition to democratic rule. This has been accompanied by concerted efforts towards regional, political, economic and social integration. The international community is aware of the strides taken by the countries in the region in their endeavour to usher in an era of peace and prosperity in Central America. The United Nations has a role in facilitating this process.

While the region appreciates that much more needs to be done, the Governments of the region are committed to realizing the goals they have set for themselves. As the Secretary-General has noted in his report, democratically elected Governments have shown themselves to be stable in the face of internal difficulties. Eleven years after the Esquipulas II agreement, the countries in the region remain committed in their resolve to achieve peace, democratization, reconciliation, development and justice.

Economic development has followed peaceful settlement of disputes in the region. The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean has noted that Central America's economic performance improved in 1997. The region's gross domestic product grew by 4 per cent compared to 2.1 per cent in the previous year. The

historic Guatemalan Peace Agreements, ending more than 35 years of internecine conflict, paved the way for an end to a vicious circle of political instability that had retarded social and economic development. Regional disputes are also being resolved amicably and peacefully. In January this year the Presidents of Honduras and El Salvador signed an accord agreeing to demarcate their borders within a year, as also a convention resolving the problems of nationality and property ownership for the border population. Some progress has also been achieved on the demarcation of the waters of the Gulf of Fonseca. Moreover, Nicaragua and Costa Rica have consistently emphasized the need to settle their differences through dialogue over transit on the San Juan River along their borders. These are all welcome developments.

The Secretary-General has noted in his report that there has been a further consolidation of the Alliance for the Sustainable Development of Central America, an ambitious and comprehensive initiative to promote respect for life, peace, democracy, human rights, ethnic diversity, economic integration and sustainable development. We welcome this.

In pursuance of the goals of regional cooperation and integration, the Heads of State of countries in the region, at their nineteenth summit in Panama City in July 1997, approved a reform of the System of Regional Integration to allow the transition from an intergovernmental system to a community system. The resulting Guidelines for the Strengthening and Rationalization of Regional Institutions proposed that the Presidents should meet at least once a year to take strategic and political decisions on integration while a Council of Foreign Ministers would operate as the main decision-making body on the integration of foreign affairs, economy, social affairs and the environment.

In September 1997 the Declaration of Nicaragua, which aims to build a Central American Union, was signed. These represent significant progress towards closer regional integration and the common pursuit of regional sustainable development, which the international community must encourage and support. From our efforts in our own region through the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, we recognize the synergies that can be created through regional striving for the benefit of the peoples of all member States.

We welcome the outcome of the Tuxtla III conference held in San Salvador in July this year, where Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras,

Mexico, Nicaragua and Panama reaffirmed their goal of working towards the establishment of a regional association that would enable them to adopt joint positions on matters of common interest and to coordinate their positions at international gatherings.

The Secretary-General in his report has observed that the Central American peace process has evolved significantly in recent years and that for the first time in decades not one of the countries in the region is plagued by internal conflict. While acknowledging that a lasting peace is dependent on maintaining strong linkages between freedom, democracy and development, the role of the people and Governments in the region in fostering peace and striving for economic development needs to be highlighted and encouraged.

We welcome the initiatives of the United Nations funds and programmes to address in a collaborative manner the developmental needs of Central America. We have appreciated the joint project of the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Children's Fund, the United Nations Development Fund for Women, the United Nations Population Fund, the United Nations programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean entitled Human Rights Campaign on Violence against Women and Girls. We are also singularly impressed by the initiative of the First Ladies of Central America, in cooperation with the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation in Agriculture and the Inter-American Development Bank, to establish the Regional Council for Rural Women, an area of special emphasis in our own country.

India's growing interaction with the countries in the region is manifest in a number of areas. We have always been a supportive partner in Central America's quest for democratization and development. India has participated in the United Nations observer missions in El Salvador and Nicaragua. India and the Central American States annually hold an institutionalized dialogue at the foreign ministers level in New York. Within the framework of the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation Programme (ITEC), India has shared its technical knowledge with various countries in the region. A draft agreement for bilateral economic and commercial cooperation is under negotiation with Honduras, which will also expand training programmes available in India. Nicaragua has also been a partner in cooperation under this programme, and India has offered various courses under this programme to Panama

and El Salvador. In a significant development, an agreement was concluded recently between four leading Indian software companies and the Salvadoran Foundation for Economic and Social Development (FUSADES) for 120 nationals of that country to undergo a nine-month training course in India. We are continuing to expand technical and economic cooperation between India and the countries of the Central American region, *inter alia* through imparting to this cooperation the required regional focus.

Years of strenuous efforts for economic development in the region have been grievously retarded by a cruel stroke of nature. The large-scale devastation recently wrought by hurricane Mitch has been of unimaginable proportions, leaving some 14,000 dead, nearly 20,000 missing and presumed dead, and 3 million homeless. According to official estimates, it will take Central America decades to rebuild destroyed infrastructure and recover from the economic losses resulting from Mitch's devastating aftermath. Last week at a summit in El Salvador, leaders of Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala appealed to the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the Inter-American Development Bank and the Central American Bank for Economic Integration to participate in working out an integral reconstruction plan for the region. A noted Nicaraguan economist, Alejandro Martinez Cuenca, a former planning minister and currently director of an international foundation dealing with the global economic challenge, recently concluded,

"Central America will not be able to get back on its feet from this tragedy with projects and charity; the only way is through the promotion of a Marshall Plan-style initiative, because the countries of Central America were so destroyed, it looks like a war took place."

We endorse this call. In the present circumstances, the Secretary-General's conclusion in his report, which was written well before hurricane Mitch struck the region, calling for the full involvement and support of the international community, is all the more imperative. There have been demands for a debt write-off for countries in the

region as well as for immediate and large-scale reconstruction efforts going beyond mere disaster relief assistance. The international community must take heed of the measureless havoc caused by such an unprecedented calamity and redouble efforts to mitigate the suffering of the peoples of the region. In spite of resource constraints, India will endeavour to contribute to the best of its capacity to the international efforts to provide succour to the disaster-stricken countries of Central America and to participate in their long-term rehabilitation and reconstruction.

The meeting rose at 1.05 p.m.