

Disarmed Forces in the Americas

By Mañanita Ochoa

I am not Chinese or Puerto Rican, nor do I make too many spelling mistakes. That is in case you think the L in the title is really an R. But the mere thought of disarmament reminds me that more than 50 years ago Costa Rica disbanded its army and sold, perhaps to a third world guerilla or criminal organization, all of the canons and rifles it had stockpiled over the years. They wisely decided that what they spent on bayonets and grenades, would go further invested in educating their children and improving the health of beggars and disenfranchised. Since, Costa Ricans have become among the most consistently developed people in the Americas. They eat like Caribbeans: tres leches, arepas, rice and beans, and sweet suckling pigs, but they live differently. They have more youth orchestras, food, health services and good teachers per capita than anyone else in the New World. A couple of years ago they incarcerated an ex President that had been appointed Secretary General of the OAS, for allegedly accepting a \$250,000 dollar bribe! That sum, which in some countries is barely enough to buy a nice Mercedes, ended the international career of one of their outstanding leaders.

Costa Rica maintains its progress because of the strength of its souls, their “almas”, the seriousness and respect towards the humanity of others, loyalty, capacity to work, creativity, and their insistence on improving their lot and the pursuit of excellence. That is food for the soul and food for “almed”, soulful forces. Costa Rica is not perfect but it is quite extraordinary as a country. In contrast, other societies that think they know a lot, while children and elders perish due to communal abandonment, spend millions on weapons without any serious threat to justify the spending.

As though we had the souls of dictators, we love planes, helicopters and threatening tanks in tacky parades and macabre displays of power. Remember Hitler's, Stalin's, Khrushchev's, Franco's and Fidel's parades, with thousands of people marching and turning their heads while extending their hands towards the dictator of the moment? We were hypnotized by those parades despite the soullessness of the actors. Where is the compass, the north that shows us sensible and respectful roads for all of those with whom we share the walk of life? Where are the forces full of souls that seek to elevate our compatriots and open the way for better countries? Where is the soul that tames alienated leaders, with the force of morality and institutional strength more lasting than that of the military? Where are they when we cannot hear their message, to lead us to higher achievements?

Renewed thought leaders need to emerge in countries to curtail the corruption and foolishness of so many opportunists! May the force of respect arm itself and may the abuses be disarmed! If countries have armies, they should be used for the legitimate defense of their territory and people, against illegitimate aggressors and in defense of the constitution and the citizens' identities. Such is the case with Colombia, a sister country with which we share borders, and which we mistreat without provocation when we have nothing better to do.

Never should armies be used to defend the personal objectives of any individual. A soldier's life is just as valuable as that of any other citizen and should not be jeopardized in vain. The soul of an armed force ennobles the destiny of the citizens it protects. Never should an armed force be able to destroy the citizens' soul.