

# **THE INTER-AMERICAN SYSTEM: ILLUSION, REALITY, AND REFORM**

## **Lecture by Sir Ronald Sanders**

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### **Abstract**

This lecture examines the illusion and fragility of the so-called *Inter-American System*—a framework that exists more in rhetoric than in function. Ambassador Sir Ronald Sanders argues that the hemisphere's institutions - the OAS, PAHO, IDB, and the Inter-American human rights bodies - operate as disconnected entities without a shared vision or integrated governance. Drawing on recent crises in Haiti and the Guyana–Venezuela border dispute, he illustrates how political evasion, chronic under-funding, and the absence of coordination have eroded credibility and performance. The lecture contends that the OAS's paralysis, Haiti's humanitarian collapse, and regional silence on Venezuela's unlawful claims all reveal a deeper systemic failure. True reform, he asserts, requires courage: financing what is authorized, aligning mandates with means, and restoring law as the shield of small states. The strength of institutions, he concludes, depends on the clarity and courage of those who serve them.

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### **Opening Remarks**

Dean Godnick, distinguished faculty, officers, and Course Participants.

It is an honour to address so distinguished an audience, and I am humbled that this College and you would regard anything I might say as worthwhile.

The Perry Center and the Inter-American Defense College are indispensable to the health of hemispheric dialogue.

The Centre trains those who will translate ideas into policy, principles into practice.

I thank you sincerely for this invitation and hope that something I say today will contribute, however modestly, to your studies and your future service.

### **I. The Mirage of a "System"**

Let me begin with a frank statement: the Inter-American system exists as a concept, not as a living reality.

In practice, it is a constellation of unconnected dots — the OAS, PAHO, the IDB, IICA, and the Inter-American Commission and Court of Human Rights — each with its own governing body, management, and purpose.

In my ten years as Ambassador to the OAS, there has never been a joint meeting of those leaders to agree on a shared vision, a common ambition, or a coordinated plan for this hemisphere's challenges.

Elsewhere, Europe has the European Union; Asia has the Association of Southeast Asian Nations; and Africa has the African Union.

Our hemisphere remains loosely tethered — more unfamiliar neighbours than a community of neighbouring states.

We invoke the phrase "Inter-American system" as though it were whole; in truth, it is a patchwork.

If dots do not connect, they cannot form a picture; and without a picture, policy becomes improvisation.

## **II. The OAS: Financial Fiction and Political Evasion**

### **II. The OAS: Financial Fiction and Political Evasion**

Nowhere is this illusion more damaging than within the Organization of American States.

Members delay or dodge their modest quotas; some even demand incentives before paying.

The OAS is the only organization in the international system where countries remain members, enjoying every privilege even if they do not pay their dues.

For 2025, the OAS membership approved a Budget of US\$93.6 million, when at least US\$120 million is required.

The assessed contributions of 33 member states total US\$93.2 million - Cuba is not included.

Yet, by October 3rd, only US\$39.7 million had been paid, leaving an outstanding balance of US\$53.9 million with barely three months left in the year.

Three countries alone account for US\$51.8 million of that non-payment.

Worse still, Venezuela's notional arrears now total roughly US\$22.8 million - unpaid since 2012 when it ceased to pay its dues.

Yet, each year - in the pretence of Venezuela's continued membership —the OAS records a fictitious annual quota of US\$1.7 million, from Venezuela, distorting both the budget and the books.

Chronic underfunding, late payments, and the political weaponization of quotas strangle the Organization.

At the OAS General Assembly in Antigua and Barbuda in June this year, I proposed three steps:

- Adopt a realistic budget that funds responsibilities;
- Reform the quota system to ensure timely, full payments with penalties; and
- Align governance with reality, basing calculations only on those members that are active and paying.

Those were structural truths - yet they have not been advanced.

The OAS remains strangled by deliberate political inaction.

A new legal development now sharpens the stakes.

On August 26, 2025, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, in a case brought by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, effectively ruled that Venezuela remains a member of the Inter-American system, including the OAS, even though the Maduro government withdrew Venezuela from the Organization, effective 2019, in accordance with the Organization's rules.

By affirming that the OAS Secretary General acted lawfully as depositary, the Court avoided the political question of who governed Venezuela and focused instead only on the legalism.

Therefore, at this time, Venezuela is declared to remain within the Inter-American human-rights system, including the OAS—even if no representative sits in its chair and it pays no dues.

For the OAS, this means:

On quorum and majorities: voting thresholds must still be calculated as if 34 members exist—including Cuba and Venezuela—though only 32 are active.

Thus, two absent states, neither attending nor contributing, exercise an unwitting veto over collective decision-making.

On the budget: the assessed shares of Venezuela exist only on paper; the cash does not.

The gap remains until arrears are paid or formally removed.

The Court has spoken in law about theoretical membership.

The OAS must now decide how to respond in practice—a profoundly difficult political conundrum.

### **III. Haiti — The Test We Are Failing**

Haiti has been - and remains - a test of hemispheric cooperation that we have failed for years and continue to fail.

On 30 September 2025, the United Nations Security Council adopted a resolution authorizing a new Gang Suppression Force (GSF) of about 5,500 personnel, supported by a UN Support Office in Haiti (UNSOH), to replace the faltering Multinational Security Support Mission (MSS) previously led by Kenya.

China and Russia - two permanent members - abstained, signalling either unease or a willingness to let a geopolitical challenge for their rival, the United States, fester.

Nonetheless, a majority approved the resolution for a twelve-month mandate.

That was a decision, not yet a strategy.

The resolution's purpose is to neutralize and deter the gangs that now control much of Port-au-Prince, wreaking chaos, lawlessness, and fear.

Yet essential questions remain unanswered:

What exactly is the GSF's mandate beyond suppression?

Who commands the Force?

To whom is it answerable?

What rules of engagement will govern operations in dense urban terrain?

And what follows its departure — whatever its mission proves to be?

I am sure that all of you, as military officers, would demand answers to those questions before joining such a force.

The reality is that even as this resolution was adopted, Haiti's fundamentals remain unchanged - an under-developed economy, mass poverty, corruption, staggering unemployment, totally inadequate health and education systems, and unchecked lawlessness.

Those are the root causes from which the gangs were born and from which they continue to draw both manpower and legitimacy.

A tactical force can clear ground; only economic and social renewal can hold it.

The Haitian National Police, even with foreign help, is exhausted.

Gangs control roads, ports, and revenue streams.

Politics is paralysed.

The unelected Transitional Presidential Council has stalled.

Elections due in November 2025 will not occur, and there is no credible plan for what happens after 7 February 2026, when the Council's mandate expires.

Each week of drift strengthens armed groups and erodes what remains of the state.

Recovery is still possible, but only if we stop mistaking disconnected projects for strategy.

From my own work and observation, the path forward has six imperatives:

- First, One integrated, budgeted plan.  
The UN, OAS, and CARICOM must operate from a single framework linking security, humanitarian access, justice, and the transition to governance. The OAS Secretary-General's proposed Haitian-Led Roadmap provides the skeleton; the GSF can be its muscle—but only if mandate, money, and milestones align.
- Second, Real financing, pooled and conditional.  
The voluntary trust-fund model has failed.  
A transparent, audited Haiti Fund is needed—financed particularly by the United States and France, joined by others whose prosperity has long drawn upon Haitian labour and markets.
- Third, disbursement based on delivery.  
Money must flow only upon verified progress: open corridors, seized arms and cash, reopened schools and clinics, and tangible steps toward political transition.
- Fourth, cut the illegal money and the guns.  
Suppression without interdiction is a revolving door.  
Unless the financiers and traffickers pay a price, the gangs will regenerate indefinitely.
- Fifth, define command, accountability, and duration—now.  
A twelve-month mandate demands a named command structure, a public chain of reporting, clear rules of engagement, and an exit-with-handover plan tied to progress in policing and governance.
- Sixth, responsibility on both sides.  
External partners must coordinate; And Haitian elites must stop manoeuvring for advantage while the state bleeds.  
Haiti needs a focused transitional government to restore security, stabilise services, prosecute criminal networks, and prepare elections once conditions allow.

If the GSF merely suppresses gangs for a year and departs, leaving the same vacuum, history will repeat itself.

If it opens space for justice, service delivery, and employment—and if that space is filled rather than abandoned—then the long work of repair can begin.

Should the GSF succeed in securing the terrain, the OAS can finally play its proper role: rebuilding democratic institutions and addressing development as its Charter mandates.

That work must be joint: PAHO on public health systems; the IDB on financing and economic stabilization; and IICA on agricultural resilience—so that security translates into durable governance and growth.

Haiti will remain the hemisphere's test of whether a genuine Inter-American system, with all its parts functioning in unison, can connect diplomacy, security, and development into a single design.

#### **IV. Law as the Shield of the Small**

I turn now to the Guyana–Venezuela territorial controversy.

More than any other issue, this one illustrates that for small states, survival depends not on might, but on law.

Let us look at the recent history of this long-standing dispute — initiated by Venezuela in 1962, even after an 1899 international tribunal had declared a “full, final, and perfect” settlement of the borders between the two countries.

In May 2015, Venezuela issued a presidential decree claiming sovereignty over Guyana's maritime space—territory extending eastward into part of Suriname's waters.

Had it stood, Guyana would have been landlocked, trapped behind a Venezuelan curtain in the Atlantic.

The decree was illegal, violating an 1897 Treaty that bound Venezuela and Britain (now Guyana) to accept the 1899 Arbitral Award.

For sixty-three years, Venezuela honoured that award.

Only in 1962, as British Guiana approached independence, did Caracas revive the myth - taught in schools - that it had been “robbed.”

That myth hardened into domestic orthodoxy, feeding nationalist passion and military adventurism: expulsions of survey vessels, intimidation of oil companies, and more recently, threats against production platforms operating in Guyana's Exclusive Economic Zone.

The logic is familiar: when a government faces economic collapse and political dissent amongst its population, it often looks outward for a cause to unite its citizens' discontent.

So, in 2015, President Maduro's decree sought to reclaim lost pride.

It could not survive legal scrutiny, so it survived on emotion.

Guyana chose another path — the path of law.

It invoked Article 33 of the UN Charter, urging the Secretary-General to refer the controversy to the International Court of Justice (ICJ).

A decade later, the Court has affirmed jurisdiction and issued provisional measures upholding Guyana's administrative control over the disputed area — the Essequibo region.

In December 2023, responding to Maduro's national referendum - deemed illegitimate by much of the international community for calling for annexation of Essequibo - the ICJ ordered both sides to refrain from aggravating the dispute.

Yet, on 1 March 2025, a Venezuelan naval vessel confronted floating production platforms in Guyana's waters, contravening the Court's order.

The response in Caracas was rhetorical theatre.

President Ali was branded the "Zelensky of the Caribbean."

Such analogies trivialize law and invite conflict.

They turn diplomacy into drama and substitute noise for norms.

What matters is legality.

The ICJ is the instrument by which principle restrains power and law empowers justice.

Small states cannot afford war.

Their defence lies in the deliberate use of law, diplomacy, and collective principle.

Guyana's course - anchored in treaties, the UN Charter, and the ICJ's process - is a model of lawful resistance in an unequal world.

The former Secretary-General of the OAS, Luis Almagro, spoke out repeatedly on Venezuela's aggression but the Organs of the Inter-American system have not.

When the ICJ delivers its final judgment, it will test the credibility of the hemisphere as much as the legitimacy of Venezuela's claim.

If Latin America and the Caribbean are truly a Zone of Peace, then every state—large or small - must abide by that ruling and stand up for it.

## **V. A Blueprint for Renewal**

Clearly, the Inter-American System needs reform and renewal.

That process must begin with honesty.

And the first honest recognition is this: few member states truly want reform.

That is why the OAS Charter, which came into force in 1951, has been amended only four times in seventy-four years—and even then, only for administrative adjustments, not substantive transformation.

Efforts to strengthen the Inter-American Democratic Charter—adopted twenty-four years ago, on September 11, 2001—have also failed.

It remains unchanged, despite repeated appeals to update and operationalize its democratic guarantees.

Although the Democratic Charter affirms vital principles—representative democracy, rule of law, human rights, separation of powers, transparency, and social inclusion—it is not a treaty and does not, by itself, create new obligations under international law.

It was adopted as a Resolution of the OAS General Assembly, serving as an authoritative interpretation of the Charter's democratic provisions; but in the end, while it is politically and morally binding, it is not legally binding in the same way as a treaty.

Beyond these fundamental deficiencies lies the deeper problem: a fragmented Inter-American architecture—a collection of unconnected organs operating separately across the Americas, each pursuing its mandate in isolation, without the coherence or coordination that a true system requires.

Until political courage replaces procedural convenience, the Inter-American System will remain a framework of aspirations without the machinery of enforcement.

## **VI. Closing Reflection**

Institutions endure only when people defend and strengthen them.

If we keep pretending that a system exists when it does not, it will die of politeness—the habit of “going along to get along.”

But if we connect the dots—finance what we authorize, coordinate what we promise, and speak truth even when inconvenient—then this hemisphere can still build a community worthy of its ideals.

The Inter-American System will become real when our governments decide to make it so.

The strength of our institutions ultimately depends on the courage of those who serve them and those who are served by them.

And that courage begins with clarity.



The Inter-American dream is not dead; it can be enlivened by structured connectivity, joint planning, and implementation, grounded in the values and principles from which it was fashioned.

When we choose to join the dots with courage and clarity, the picture will at last resemble the promise.

I welcome your questions and your dialogue—because honest conversation is the first act of reform.

Thank you.

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## **ANNEX: Endnotes and Bibliography**

### **Endnotes**

1. The OAS, PAHO, IDB, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, and Inter-American Court of Human Rights each have independent governing bodies and mandates. There is no standing mechanism for coordination across them. See the foundational statutes and charters of each institution at the Organization of American States (OAS) and Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) legal portals.
2. *Charter of the Organization of American States* (signed Bogotá, 30 April 1948; entered into force 13 December 1951). United Nations Treaty Series, Vol. 119, I-1609.
3. The Charter has been amended four times: the Protocol of Buenos Aires (1967/1970), Protocol of Cartagena de Indias (1985/1988), Protocol of Washington (1992/1997), and Protocol of Managua (1993/1996), each addressing administrative or institutional adjustments.
4. Inter-American Court of Human Rights, *Chirinos Salamanca et al. v. Venezuela*, Judgment on Preliminary Objections, 21 August 2025 (published 26 August 2025, Series C No. 562).
5. A Chronology of Events and Supporting Material, concerning the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela and the Seating of a Nominated Representative of Juan Guaido as Venezuela's representative at the Organization of American States and its Consequences for the Organization; Document circulated by the Permanent Council of the OAS as OAS/Ser.G; CP/INF.10157/24; 2 April 2024.
6. *United Nations Security Council Resolution on Haiti*, adopted 30 September 2025, authorized a Gang Suppression Force (GSF) and UN Support Office in Haiti (UNSOH). *China* and *Russia* abstained. See United Nations press release SC/15682 and Security Council Report, "Haiti: Draft Resolution Authorizing a 'Gang Suppression Force' and a UN Support Office," 30 Sept. 2025.

7. Réseau National de Défense des Droits Humains (RNDDH), *The PNH Faces the Armed Gangs* (Port-au-Prince: June 2025).
8. *Arbitral Award of 3 October 1899 (Guyana v. Venezuela)*, Judgment and Provisional Measures, *International Court of Justice*, Order of 1 Dec. 2023.
9. *Joint Declaration of Argyle for Dialogue and Peace between Guyana and Venezuela* (14 Dec. 2023). Government of Barbados Official Website.
10. Venezuela's *Presidential Decree No. 1,787* (27 May 2015), establishing the "Atlantic Coast of Venezuela," extended maritime claims eastward into Guyanese and Surinamese waters.
11. Sir Ronald Sanders, "Guyana and Venezuela: Let the International Court Decide," [www.sirronaldsanders.com](http://www.sirronaldsanders.com), 11 June 2015.
12. Sir Ronald Sanders, "If Guyana's President Ali is the 'Zelensky of the Caribbean,' Who Is the Putin?," [www.sirronaldsanders.com](http://www.sirronaldsanders.com), 6 March 2025.
13. *Inter-American Democratic Charter*, adopted by the OAS General Assembly at its special session in Lima, Peru, 11 September 2001. Official OAS Document Series, OEA/Ser.P, AG/RES.1 (XXVIII-E/01).
14. The Charter is a resolution, not a treaty, and thus creates no new binding obligations in international law. It provides authoritative interpretation of OAS Charter provisions concerning democracy, rule of law, and human rights.

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