



**Pan American
Health
Organization**



**World Health
Organization**
REGIONAL OFFICE FOR THE
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69th SESSION OF THE REGIONAL COMMITTEE OF WHO FOR THE AMERICAS

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OPENING REMARKS BY HON. DR. THOMAS E. PRICE
SECRETARY OF THE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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Good morning, *buenas días*, *bonjour*, and *bom dia*.

It is an honor to welcome you all to Washington, and to be here for my first Pan American Sanitary Conference.

I especially want to thank you, Dr. Steele, for your leadership as President of the Pan American Sanitary Conference, and Director Etienne, for your leadership over the past five years.

Dr. Etienne, congratulations on the completion of your first term. We are confident that your next term will maintain the commitment to transforming the organization to accomplish its mission.

Our prayers go out for continued recovery from the recent hurricanes and earthquakes that have struck Mexico and the Caribbean: We know that countries in the region have suffered greatly over the last couple of weeks.

We had the chance to see some of the storms' devastation in Texas and Florida firsthand. It is heartbreaking, and a crucial reminder of the importance of investing in public health preparedness and response.

We must be prepared not just for hurricanes and earthquakes, however. We must be prepared for biological threats as well.

Earlier this year, I traveled to Liberia to highlight the defeat of the Ebola epidemic in West Africa, and thank those on the front lines of that effort.

That trip underscored a couple of things. First, infectious diseases do not respect boundaries between countries – as the people of Liberia, Guinea, and Sierra Leone know well.

And, as we have seen in our own hemisphere with Zika, they can spread rapidly through international travel, to imperil the health, security, and prosperity of people across whole regions of the globe.

Second, there is a great disparity of preparedness among countries that needs to be addressed: the human cost of disease outbreaks can escalate so rapidly, so unnecessarily, when countries do not have capacity to respond.

It has been a privilege for the United States to help Liberia and Sierra Leone build their own capabilities for fighting infectious disease, and to see Liberia succeed in battling a recent outbreak of meningitis. Many of the nations represented here today have contributed to such work beyond their borders, as well.

All of us must work together to mitigate outbreaks and improve preparedness. That is why global health security is at the top of my global priorities, and why President Trump has been so committed to the Global Health Security Agenda.

Many of you here in this room, and the governments you represent, have worked diligently to implement the International Health Regulations (IHR) and achieve our shared goals for health security.

Significant progress has been made, but we have much more work ahead of us.

We must refine and improve our public health systems for the diverse threats that we face. We need to identify areas for improvement and implement changes wherever possible. That means using the tools we have at our disposal, including external evaluations, simulation exercises, and after-event performance reviews.

PAHO has an important role to play in global health security, and I look forward to HHS working with PAHO and its member states on these efforts.

One of the other lessons we took away from the World Health Assembly, and that we hope the whole world took from the Ebola crisis, was the need for a strong WHO and, as a corollary, the need for intensive WHO reform.

Having met and spoken with Dr. Tedros several times now, I know he is committed to WHO reform and making WHO the organization we all need it to be. I hope you all will join him, and the United States, in working on an agenda for ongoing improvements.

Thinking back to the World Health Assembly, and keeping close tabs on the proceedings leading up to the Sanitary Conference, it has been striking the amount of time, energy, and resources that are spent on highly contentious issues that do not support the core missions of WHO or PAHO.

Many of these fall outside of PAHO and WHO's essential mission which, by definition, means that we are taking our eye off the ball.

The most meaningful reform that both PAHO and WHO could undertake would be a recommitment to core principles, chief among them battling infectious disease, and then maintaining dedication to those core principles.

We are encouraged that Dr. Tedros has committed to developing a prioritized agenda early in his tenure, and we suggest that PAHO should consider doing the same.

In focusing on the priorities that require cooperation, we must consider expanding the scope of that cooperation as well, not just between agencies and across borders, but also with civil society and the private sector. We cannot succeed at the vital goals we have without going outside the walls of government.

Last, we must always focus on protecting the most vulnerable among us – at every stage of life. Nations here today, in collaboration with PAHO and WHO, have made tremendous strides in improving maternal and child health. We are proud that President Trump's new Protecting Life in Global Health Assistance policy stands up for the most vulnerable children of all.

At the United Nations last week, President Trump reminded us that “all responsible leaders have an obligation to serve their own citizens, and the nation-state remains the best vehicle for elevating the human condition. But making a better life for our people also requires us to work together in close harmony and unity to create a more safe and peaceful future for all people.”

PAHO and the World Health Organization provide important opportunities for us to work in that spirit of harmony and unity, to secure a safe and healthful future for all.

Indeed, without these organizations, and our leaders, focusing on issues that demand international cooperation, such a future will not be possible.

I look forward to meeting with as many of you as we can, visiting as many of you as we can, and working with you on the critical missions we have before us.

Thank you for your attention and participation today. We look forward to the work of the next several days, and the years to come.

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