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**ADDRESS BY THE NATIONAL COORDINATOR AND SPECIAL ENVOY  
FOR THE AMERICAS, V SUMMIT OF THE AMERICAS  
AMBASSADOR LUIS ALBERTO RODRÍGUEZ**

**REMARKS BY HIS EXCELLENCY LUIS ALBERTO RODRIGUEZ  
NATIONAL COORDINATOR AND SPECIAL ENVOY FOR THE AMERICAS**

**V SUMMIT OF THE AMERICAS  
AT THE INAUGURAL SESSION OF THE  
27<sup>TH</sup> PAN AMERICAN SANITARY CONFERENCE**

**Washington, D.C., 1 October 2007**

I am extremely pleased to be part of the proceedings to inaugurate the 27<sup>th</sup> Pan American Sanitary Conference under the auspices of the Pan-American Health Organisation (PAHO). The work undertaken in the context of these Ministerial Meetings and at institutions such as PAHO is an important part of the Summit of the Americas process. It is through these efforts that political consensus building is strengthened, cooperation is deepened and the momentum for action on key Summit mandates is driven.

This Ministerial follows on the heels of the recently concluded CARICOM Summit on Chronic Non-communicable Diseases (NCDs). Hosted by the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, it was the first meeting of leaders to be held on this issue anywhere in the world. The Summit made clear CARICOM's commitment, at the highest political level, to changing the health outlook of its population.

In CARICOM, five times as many people die from non-communicable diseases as from all the other illnesses combined, and the mortality rate is ten times higher than that of HIV/AIDS. In the Port of Spain Declaration, CARICOM leaders agreed to take action to strengthen regional health mechanisms; establish national commissions on non-communicable and chronic diseases; regulate tobacco and alcohol use; promote physical education in schools and workplaces; improve food security and public education on diet and health; provide healthy school meals; and establish programmes for research and surveillance.

In Trinidad and Tobago, Prime Minister Patrick Manning has already moved decisively to implementation by increasing taxes on tobacco and alcohol, adjusting the content of the meals provided to school children and by placing greater emphasis on physical education in the school curricula.

Distinguished Delegates, the Fifth Summit of the Americas in Port of Spain in 2009 will mark fifteen years of the Summit process. As host of this Summit, we believe that the time is opportune for considerable reflection, consolidation and refocusing. There is no doubt that the Summit process has been successful in bringing our Region closer and more connected to the key issues facing our people. Yet, I continue to maintain, there is so much more that could and should be done, not only in terms of the strategies we employ but also in terms of

implementation and the mechanisms for the engagement of key stakeholders. If the Summit process is to continue to fulfill the promise that was first envisioned in 1994, then it is important for all of us - collectively as a Region and individually as sovereign States and institutions, to critically examine the experiences and results of the last 13 years.

Since assuming chairmanship of the Summit process one year ago, we have been examining the issue of what the new agenda for the Americas should be. We cannot overlook the fact that poverty, marginalization and inequality continue to incapacitate many of our people, economic growth while positive needs to be sustained over a longer period and international competitiveness is weak in many areas. We also cannot ignore that energy, crime, violence and narcotrafficking, natural disasters and climate change are all important considerations. Moreover, we have not failed to notice the increasing attention being given to the youth across the Hemisphere.

We believe, however, that these are not isolated issues. They are all connected to the goal of human security in some form. The challenge for us is to integrate those key elements that will do the most good for the most people.

In selecting the theme for the Summit, our overriding aim, therefore, is to build strong consensus around commitments that will bring tangible and sustained benefits to people living across our Hemisphere. For us, the success of the Fifth Summit will be defined by three factors.

First, it must be a Summit of renewal that reconnects with the people of the Hemisphere. This means that the theme and the mandates must be relevant and responsive to their needs and make a positive difference in their lives. This will help restore credibility to the Summit process.

Second, it must forge a consensus around a viable implementation strategy involving the strengthening of institutions and national systems. It must also endow the Summit process with stronger mechanisms for continuity. In this regard, the role of Ministerial Meetings will become more important.

Third, the Fifth Summit must serve to renew the commitment to deeper integration and cooperation among member states and institutions operating in the region. Although there are many differences among countries, the benefits to be derived from stronger hemispheric cooperation must never be underestimated. The region as a whole and individual countries in particular stand to gain considerably by the sharing of resources, knowledge, expertise and information.

Without a doubt, achieving a high standard of health and stronger functioning health systems must be an important part of any future agenda for the Americas. Health is at the very core of human security and sustainable human development. In reality, it cannot be de-linked from other social

conditions such as poverty, malnutrition, lack of access to basic services, social exclusion and unemployment.

The past Summits have all underscored the importance of health. At the First Summit in Miami in 1994, child, maternal and reproductive health received priority attention. Four years later, in Santiago, the use of new technologies to improve the health conditions of families received priority attention. At the Third Summit in Quebec City, 2001, the focus was on combating communicable diseases, in particular HIV/AIDS; and non-communicable diseases stemming from consumption of tobacco, alcohol and drugs as well as mental illness, cancer and diabetes among others. Health sector reform was also placed on the agenda as a means of improving quality, efficiency and access. The Special Summit in Monterrey in 2004 broadened and deepened the response to HIV/AIDS. At the Fourth Summit in Mar de Plata two years ago, the emphasis was on:

- improving the health and safety of all workers and preventing and controlling occupational hazards;
- strengthening cooperation against chronic diseases as well as emerging and re-emerging diseases such as HIV/AIDS, SARS, malaria, tuberculosis and avian flu;
- formulating disaster management plans to address the possibility of influenza and avian flu pandemics; and
- enhancing primary health care.

The strong and sustained focus on health has brought with it important advances. Life expectancy at birth has increased by an average of six years, population growth has slowed, infant mortality has been halved, deaths from communicable diseases have fallen and there is now better access to primary health care.

Notwithstanding these advances, our Region continues to face the challenge of dealing with the emergence of new diseases while the threat of old diseases remains. The situation is made worse by the fact that there is inadequate public financing of healthcare and inequity in access to health services. The sad truth of some countries is that the gap between those who can and those who cannot access basic health care is widening. There is an urgent need now to increase public expenditures on health. While the international benchmark on public spending ranges from 6-7% of GDP, the region, on average, spends about approximately half of this amount.

We know as well that health challenges cannot be examined in isolation. They go hand in hand with challenges in education, water, sanitation and food security and as the 2007 edition of the *Health in the Americas* Report notes “the greatest share of health problems is attributable to broad social determinants – “the causes behind the causes” of ill-health.”

Distinguished Delegates, I want to applaud the efforts of the Working Group under the presidency of Panama for pioneering the development of the Health Agenda for the Americas 2008-2017 which was launched in Panama City in June this year by the Ministers and Secretaries of Health of the Americas.

The Agenda is important for several reasons:

1. It renews the commitment to achieving a high standard of health as a basic human right.
2. It places health as a fundamental pillar of the inter-american agenda for promoting human security and creating the conditions for sustained improvements in the quality of life.
3. It recognizes that dealing with the health challenge is a shared responsibility. As such, it came out of a process of dialogue and consensus building and provides a new framework for cooperation among all stakeholders at the local, national, sub-regional and regional levels.
4. It is based on the principles of universality, equity, access, inclusion and participation which assure that all will benefit.

Countries now have the task of using this framework for the design and implementation of their public health policies. This will require commitment, financing, and sustained efforts at capacity building.

Distinguished Delegates, in closing I want to say we are optimistic about the future of the Americas and we are committed to making the Fifth Summit a catalyst for positive change. In establishing a new agenda for the Americas, one of the issues we need to address is the capacity of our institutions at both the hemispheric and national levels to drive and support such an agenda. It is only through strong, capable institutions that the Summit process will produce the benefits envisioned by our leaders.

I take the opportunity to invite all member states and institutions such as PAHO to work with the Fifth Summit of Americas Secretariat to define the strategic priorities around which we can build consensus for collective action. I also want to emphasise to the Ministers of Health here today, the important role they have in effectively implementing the new Health Agenda for the Americas.

I thank you.