

**Key address by Raul Castro Ruz, President of the Council of State and Ministers of the Republic of Cuba to the Opening Session of the 7th Summit of the Association of Caribbean States. Havana, Cuba, June 4, 2016.**



Distinguished Heads of State and/or Government,

Esteemed Ambassador Alfonso Munera Cavadia, Secretary General of the Association of Caribbean States,

Distinguished delegates and guests,

For the seventh time, we are meeting as Heads of States and/or Government, alongside other high representatives of the States and territories of the Association of Caribbean States, ACS. On this occasion we have gathered for a deep exchange on the theme “Together to confront the challenges of sustainable development, climate change and peace in the Caribbean”.

Our deliberations will also be aimed at strengthening the organization on the basis of its foundational principles, as a mechanism of coordination, cooperation and concerted action.

We welcome the French Overseas Collectivity of Saint Martin, a new Associate Member, and salute the adherence as Observers of the Multinational State of Bolivia, the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Eastern Republic of Uruguay and the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA-TCP), the same as the presence of representatives of nations and organizations as Observers.

We hope one day to be able to count with the adherence of all of the Caribbean territories, including the sister island of Puerto Rico, as an independent and sovereign nation.

When in July 1994, the Heads of States and/or Government of 25 independent nations met in the city of Cartagena de Indias, along with delegates from other Caribbean territories, embracing the historic initiative of CARICOM to establish the Association of Caribbean States, it was our purpose to work together in defense of our identities, cultural heritage and common interests; to reinforce political coordination and cooperation; and to advance with sustainable development, and the integration of our peoples.

The Program Declaration of our 1st Summit in Trinidad and Tobago defined Tourism, Transportation and Commerce as strategic areas. Then, cooperation to cope with natural disasters was later added to these. The Declaration of the 6th Summit held in Merida, Mexico, in April 2014, commemorating the 20th Anniversary of the ACS, and the Petion Ville Plan of Action adopted at the 5th Summit the year before in that city of the Republic of Haiti, reaffirmed unquestionable achievements but also enormous challenges still ahead.

The issue of connection by air and by sea, its high costs and economic difficulties, largely the consequence of the global crisis-- jeopardize commerce and investments between our countries. Therefore, it is urgent to find creative and viable solutions beneficial to all, mindful of the special and differentiated treatment required by smaller states.

The development of multi-destination tourism, the diversification of markets, increases in the quality and diversity of tourist services and the training of skilled personnel also stand as priority areas.

Allow me to avail myself of the occasion to underline that Cuba is especially interested in enhancing and consolidating cooperation with our Caribbean brothers and sisters in the tourism sector.

On the other hand, the occurrences associated to climate change, such as the rising of sea level that threatens the very existence of small islands; the more frequent and increasingly powerful hurricanes; and, the intensive rainfalls, coastal erosion and extensive droughts bring considerable human and economic damage to our nations. That is why the development of cooperation to reduce the risks of disasters, and mitigate their effects, is a pressing necessity for our governments, and should take central stage in our plan of action for the future.

The agreement reached at the Paris Summit on Climate Change stands as a significant starting point, but we should continue our work to have it implemented, and to enlarge its scope, always on the basis of common but differentiated responsibilities, and recognizing the vulnerabilities of the least developed countries, particularly the small island states.

We advocate the principle that irrational production and consumption patterns should be modified, and insist that the political will of the industrial nations is required to cut down emissions of greenhouse effect friendly gases, and to make serious pledges in terms of funds and technological transfer.

Another issue demanding priority attention concerns sovereignty over our natural resources, which constitute a guarantee for the future and a source of wealth for our peoples. Allowing their unrestricted exploitation by foreign interests, with negligible profits for our nations, is tantamount to compromising development and adding to existing dependence.

In the past few years, the ACS has concentrated its main efforts on advancing cooperation in the previously mentioned strategic areas. This is certainly positive, and we should continue working on it, but never losing sight of the fact that the current circumstances pose severe challenges that we also need to confront together.

We cannot remain indifferent to disturbances in Latin America and the Caribbean resulting from the imperialist and oligarchic counteroffensive unleashed against popular and progressive governments, which emerged after the failure of the neoliberal wave. This constitutes a threat to peace, stability, unity and indispensable regional integration.

The situation demands the reinforcement of consultation and coordination mechanisms in conformity with the precepts contained in Proclamation of Latin America and the Caribbean as a Zone of Peace, signed by the Heads of States and/or Government attending the 2nd Summit of the Community of

Latin American and Caribbean Countries (CELAC), held in Havana in January 2014. We should also urge others to respect those principles in their relations with our countries.

The commitments of States in the region to not interfere, directly or indirectly, in the internal affairs of any other State, and to abide by the principles of national sovereignty, equality of rights and the free determination of the peoples; to promote friendly and cooperative relations between them, and with other nations; to exercise tolerance and live in peace; and, to fully respect every State's inalienable right to choose its political, economic, social and cultural system are unavoidable conditions to peace, harmony, development and the integration of our countries.

I reaffirm our strongest and unconditional solidarity with the fraternal people of Venezuela, with the legitimate government of President Nicolas Maduro, and with the Bolivarian Revolution initiated by Commander Hugo Chavez Frias. They are firmly resisting the destabilizing thrust, and the economic and media warfare undertaken by those who intend to sweep away the political, economic and social conquests that have brought benefits to millions of people who for centuries lived in conditions of poverty, injustice and inequality.

It is a source of deep concern, the unacceptable attempt by the Secretary General of the Organization of American States to apply the so-called Inter American Democratic Charter to interfere with the internal affairs of Venezuela. The statement published by our Ministry of Foreign Affairs explains Cuba's position and releases me of offering details.

I would only reiterate our view that the OAS, from its inception was, as it is and will continue to be, an instrument of imperialist domination, and no reform whatsoever can change its nature or its history. That is why Cuba will never return to the OAS.

We also extend our solidarity to the Brazilian people and their Constitutional President Dilma Rousseff, who is bravely confronting the parliamentary coup d'état promoted by the rightwing and neoliberal oligarchy, intent on reversing the social achievements scored during the governments headed by the Workers Party.

I reaffirm our satisfaction with the progress attained in the Colombian peace process, and reiterate that we shall keep up the effort to contribute to achieve the completion of an agreement that can definitely put an end to the armed conflict in that sister nation.

The preservation of peaceful coexistence and stability makes it indispensable to prevent the aggravation of territorial disputes inherited from colonial days. These should be settled through dialogue and negotiation, and fully aware of the historic responsibility that we have to our peoples for the future of peace, justice, equity and the sustainable development that we all aspire to build.

This conference offers propitious occasion to restate our steadfast determination to continue cooperating and sharing our modest achievements with our Caribbean brothers and sisters, despite the economic challenges we face.

Likewise, we are fully committed to support the reconstruction and development of the fraternal Republic of Haiti, the birthplace of the first revolution for independence and slave emancipation in Our America.

I reaffirm our support for the legitimate demand of countries of the Caribbean Community to be compensated for the horrors of slavery and slave trade. By the same token, I reiterate our resolute support for the right of small and vulnerable states to be accorded a special and differentiated treatment, in terms of access to commerce and investments, and their just demand to receive cooperation according to their real needs and not on the basis of indexes of per capita income that

classify them as middle income countries, thus preventing their access to indispensable financial resources.

We shall never forget that when the ACS was established, in July 1994, our Caribbean brothers and sisters defended our membership in the bosom of this united family. At the time, Cuba was undergoing an extremely challenging situation, since our economy had fallen by 35%, due to the sudden loss of its major markets, in the aftermath of the demise of the European socialist camp and mounting imperialist pressures to corner and destroy the Revolution.

We shall neither forget the unrelenting support that every government represented here has provided to our just demand for the removal of the economic, commercial and financial blockade imposed on Cuba by the United States; a blockade that remains in force, despite the fact that it has been rejected 24 times at the United Nations General Assembly, and other important fora, like the Summit of the Americas held in Panama last year; and despite positive but insufficient measures adopted by the current U.S. Administration.

We also appreciate the support displayed at the 4th CELAC Summit with respect to our demand for the return of the Cuban territory unlawfully occupied by a U.S. Naval Base in Guantanamo, against the will of our people and government.

Before concluding my remarks, I wish to pay tribute to the memory of an outstanding Jamaican intellectual, Professor Norman Girvan, a restless combatant for progress in the Caribbean, and for regional integration, and a great friend of Cuba, who served as Secretary General of our Association.

We should also acknowledge at this point, the remarkable work of Ambassador Alfonso Munera Cavadia in these four years as Secretary General of the ACS, and express our satisfaction over the election of Saint Lucia's Ambassador June Soomer, the first woman to assume this responsibility, and to whom we wish the greatest success.

Now, without further delay I pronounce the 7th Summit of the Association of Caribbean States open.

Thank you.