

Opening Remarks: SG Dr. June Soomer at the 22nd Ordinary Meeting of the ACS Ministerial Council



- President of the Republic of Cuba, Your Excellency, Raul Castro,
- Hon. Minister of Foreign Affairs of Cuba, Bruno Rodriguez Parilla,
- Hon. Ministers and Heads of Delegation of the Membership, Observers and Founding Observers of the ACS,
- Distinguished Members of the Diplomatic Corps,
- Esteemed Specially Invited Guests,
- Members of the Press,
- Ladies and Gentleman,

Good morning,

[Allow me to begin by expressing our deep appreciation, President Castro, for making the time to be with us, the extended Caribbean family of Cuba. It is truly an honour and pleasure for the ACS]

Allow me also to join Minister Rodriguez in paying tribute to another great son of the Caribbean whom we lost on 3 March, 2017- H. E. René Préval, twice President of the great Republic of Haiti. The ACS joins the people and governments of the Caribbean in expressing its deepest condolences to the bereaved family and nation of this loved and respected man.

As this is my first address to the Ministerial Council of the ACS, I would like to commence by thanking you for the ratification of my nomination as Secretary General. My selection signals to the entire region that all citizens can aspire to serve the Caribbean at the highest level, despite their race, gender, economic class or the size of their country. This organisation should therefore take pride in the foresight of this decision, for were it not for the honour displayed, a Saint Lucian female from a humble home would not be addressing you today. There is nothing so wrong with our organisation that we cannot fix if we engender respect and good will towards the least of our citizenry.

As the first female to hold such a position in a multilateral organisation in this region, I want those of you who are still hesitant in support to take comfort in the words of Jose Marti, the Cuban national hero, who stated "But when women are moved and lend help, when women, who are by nature calm and controlled, give encouragement and applause, when virtuous and knowledgeable women grace the endeavour with their sweet love, then it is invincible." Let me assure you that at the end of my tenure, we will be on our way to invincibility. I will pay attention to detail and focus on vision; I will foster good human relations and excellence in team work; I will bring visibility to the ACS, as my aim is to ensure that the people, not only the governments, know this organisation.

Our visibility must start with the protection of our joint patrimony, the Caribbean Sea. When in his 1992 Nobel Lecture Derek Walcott wrote, and I quote, "I mean the Caribbean Sea, whose smell is the smell of refreshing possibility as well as survival...There is a territory wider than this - wider than the limits made by the map of an island - which is the illimitable sea and what it remembers." He was asking us to remember that not only our history but our renaissance was linked to that Sea. We must again put it at the centre of our ACS and be at the table when its definition and survival are discussed. It is this sea that gives us the opportunity to not only revitalize but reposition ourselves on our way to relevance and sustainability.

We meet today at a singular juncture in history. Seismic geopolitical shifts are reconfiguring the global landscape and we as a Region must be prepared for the re-positioning that these shifts will necessarily imply. As soundings from the around the world challenge our principles, and north and south confront common challenges ranging from climate change to transnational terror; as multilateralism retreats to reconsider, and a myopic nationalism tinged with mercantilism asserts itself; as trade and economic stagnation continue to threaten small and large economies alike, the varied membership of the Association of Caribbean States must regroup, strategize and advance.

We knew from the outset that in our arrangement, where our countries range in physical size, population and economic resources, that finding equitable ways to share burdens and costs would be difficult. Yet this coming together of disparate groups of nation-states and divergent power and resources has survived these 22 years because our larger members have not imposed on the institutionalised functioning of the organization and our smaller members have affirmed their right to be heard and considered as equals. The possibility of distrust that emerges when there is a union between large and small is counteracted by the fact that every member state can fully participate without restriction.

How better to regroup but by reminding ourselves of everything we have achieved through collective and concerted action, by affirming the ties- historical, ideological and geopolitical- that have always united us, by aspiring to more than our comparative size and conventional wisdom might imagine possible, and by excellence- as the platform for our forward and upward thrust

Ladies and gentlemen, these are not vain and ambitious claims. They are grounded as much in our history as in our contemporary reality. Allow me to illustrate. The Nobel Laureate Room at the ACS Secretariat Headquarters, which will add its 13th member, our newest honouree, the distinguished

President of Colombia, later this year, attests to our tradition of excellence. My own country Saint Lucia has two Laureates. I say this only to remind us that the small states, who were the visionaries for this arrangement, have never been in the shadows. They have taken places at the table. The brave and principled voices of newly independent Caribbean States that embraced and affirmed Cuba when the hegemony of the time tried to shut our sister island out, attest to our culture of excellence. You have had a fearless voice that has been heard globally on the embargo against Cuba.

Your voices reverberated across the world on the issue of climate change at a time when more powerful voices were in denial. You championed the call for the now globally accepted concept of Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and did ground-breaking work in bringing such critical issues as Non Communicable Diseases and the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons to the table. The resonance of your voice is amplified within the ACS through members who have been called to the table in international fora to which small states have not been invited. Therefore we should be reminded that true consensus and decision making can only be effective when every voice is heard. So my focus will also be on increased participation at all levels, thereby fulfilling one of the mandates of the Havana Declaration.

Our ACS region is not made to take a back seat. It is not in our nature to resign ourselves to a fate or a place in the world dictated by others. Ours is not a region of mediocrity. We are both a region of peace and a region of excellence.

Today we will adopt a Resolution of Mourning to a leader who will forever be known for a lifetime of forging his own destiny on his own terms, and teaching his people how to do the same. That is our regional heritage, the legacy that you, the policy makers of today, will continue -through the decisions you continue to make, today and going forward.

I am proud, privileged and committed, as Secretary-General of our ENTIRE membership, as a Caribbean woman and beyond that, a Greater Caribbean woman, to breathe life into your decisions and to make them felt on the ground for the good of our Regional citizenry.

However, to effectively execute these co-dependent processes of decision making and implementation, we must take stock of our operating environment and construct an enabling environment that gives us space to manoeuvre and to optimize our comparative advantages, while actively converting our weaknesses into strengths. I believe that to do so, we must:

- Strengthen the dialogue among our policy makers and between our policy makers and our people. There must be trust between us, no fissures, no gaps, and critically, there must be FULL participation;
- We must be loyal to the concept of unity in diversity and see our differences as assets and not as deficiencies or discrepancies. Our languages and cultures, our public education and academic systems must be leveraged as part of our collective wealth;
- We must also leverage our national comparative advantages to the benefit of our Membership. We have already enjoyed success in doing things by ourselves and for ourselves. However, for the most part that success is little known. The ACS is the best kept secret in this hemisphere. This is a serious travesty that must be seriously addressed. The fact is that each individual Member of this Association brings value and the ACS brings value added to its individual members. This must be known; Hágaselo saber a la gente. Let us take it to the people.
- Finally, we must continue to build a network of partners who pursue excellence as vigorously as we do and who are ready to invest in our efforts to strengthen ourselves and offer substance and

meaning to the world. We must reconnect with our founding observers and nurture relationships with new partners.

The Secretariat has facilitated:

- The Technical Working Group established to action the mandate to revitalize the ACS. Their proposals are before you today. They have done tremendous work under the noble chairmanship of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Cuba and I thank them. I believe that it was fortuitous that my appointment coincided with the Chairmanship of Cuba. The guidance and strong support received will always be appreciated. It would be remiss of me not to also place on record my particular gratitude to Minister Rodriguez and to commend three truly dedicated and talented servants of Cuba - Vice Minister Rogelio Sierra Diaz and Ambassadors Zamora and Vasquez. They have done yeoman service over the last year. Yet, as the saying goes, the reward for good work is more work. I believe that there is scope for an extended mandate of the TWG, and I commend this to the 22nd Ministerial Council.

- Again under the leadership of Cuba, we convened on March 8th the Inaugural Cooperation Conference of the ACS to bring together our entire Membership, Observers, Founding Observers and Interested parties to actively evaluate and discuss our cooperation; to mobilise ideas, partnerships and resources; and to share information on the value added that we as an institution offer ourselves and others. Ministers, Ambassadors, Ladies and Gentlemen, let there be no mistake, an Association that keeps attracting Observers and other interested parties is one on the rise. Let us not be afraid to rise to any challenge that we may face, but let us also equip ourselves adequately to do so.

- We must strengthen our ACS Secretariat to meet the demands of a membership that expects results. There are innovative ways to do this in a time of resource constraints, including through institutional strengthening. Our interpretation and translation facilities must be upgraded. ICT must be the platform on which we work, innovate and exchange but also record the projects of the past and manage those of the future. Additionally, on the heels of the mandate of the 7th Summit to place renewed focus on culture and education, we must as a Secretariat find ways to develop and implement meaningful programmes in these related areas. We have already committed to CARIFESTA we urge our membership to be part of this cultural extravaganza in Barbados in August this year. We have also committed to the pursuit of excellence through education on our regional successes. One of the things I would like to do is network with our young ACS citizenry to increase knowledge of the other. Certainly I would wish to see the ACS Secretariat become a space where tertiary level interns, eager to learn and contribute, find a place to advance their education through hands-on experience. The physical space of the Secretariat should be a constant exhibition of the culture of our Members, alive with lectures and performances, art exhibitions and concerts. The ACS Secretariat should be that organization where the ideal of living language diversity is seen as a wealth, and not a liability. Our linguistic differences are really not walls but waves - a fluid force that binds us, washing our shores with new ways of knowing and perceiving.

- In the spirit of what I just said, let me also refer to our efforts at the Secretariat to begin developing and implementing a communication plan that aims at informing, rallying and uniting our people around the ideals of the Association of Caribbean States. ACS stands for many things - A Courageous Spirit, A Creative Spirit, A Community Spirit, A Constructive Spirit, A Can-Do Spirit, A Conquering Spirit. I am excited about this project that I wish to see transformed into a sustainable exercise to commemorate and inspire future generations of our ACS.

In this brave new ACS world, peopled by clamouring giants and courageous Davids, we in the Caribbean have always been called upon to make our stand and secure our place. Our history

reminds us that we have always forged a way, that we have always confidently swung well aimed smooth stones- or more aptly put, cricket balls, baseballs and soccer balls. We have always overcome obstacles victoriously when we act together. In these uncertain times let us bind together and form an indomitable sling, and swing resolute bats. Let us swing, swing hard to success. Juntos somos más fuertes, Ensemble, nous sommes plus forts. Together we are stronger.

I thank you