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Commentary: For the lives of mothers, newborns, and children

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By Dr Mirta Roses Periago, Director of the Pan American Sanitary Bureau
Dr Francisco Songane, Director of the Partnership for Maternal, Newborn, and Child Health

Today is a great day for mothers and children in Latin America and the Caribbean, a day that will be remembered as the turning point in the Region's struggle to translate the commitment to reducing maternal and infant mortality into a reality.



**Mirta Roses-Periago is the Director of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO).
AFP PHOTO**

Chile, Brazil, Bolivia, and Ecuador are making history by launching the Act NOW for Women and Children initiative to give real priority to the goal of saving their lives. The Partnership for Maternal, Newborn, and Child Health, the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), and, especially, the Prime Minister of Norway, Jens Stoltenberg, a great global promoter of this initiative, are honored to support them.

There can be no delay. Every year, over 22,000 women in the Region die from causes related to pregnancy and childbirth, along with nearly 400,000 children under the age of 5. Worldwide, in the brief time required to read this article, four women who are pregnant or giving birth and 80 boys and girls under 5 will die.

Significantly reducing these two serious problems is part of the Millennium Development Goals, specifically Goals 4 and 5. However, the level of progress made thus far is not enough to achieve them by the target date. Decisive action is needed to accelerate efforts, and we must take it now, according to the

Network of Global Leaders, created and led by Norway, in which the Region is represented by President Michelle Bachelet and President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva.

The inequality that has historically characterized Latin America and the Caribbean profoundly impacts maternal and infant mortality rates. Rural populations, original peoples, Afro-descendants, and the poor lack timely access to skilled professionals and adequate services for prenatal care, delivery, and the puerperium.

The initiative therefore emphasizes better training in maternal and neonatal management, the training of nurses and midwives to assist with delivery and the management of high obstetric risk, and the sharing of knowledge to provide care in childbirth with a multicultural approach.

It is, moreover, a partnership involving horizontal, or South-South, cooperation, since the

participants in this regional initiative are all developing countries. In subsequent stages, in addition to South America, countries of Central America and the rest of the Region will be added.

This initiative enjoys the political commitment essential for change, sustained financing, and a public awareness and community mobilization plan to stimulate the demand for health services -- demand that will be met through training and management activities that will lead to more and better professionals in this field. It is the integrated response of the Region to a silent tragedy and to the ethical imperative of reducing maternal and child mortality, so that, all of us can sing in unison, to paraphrase Violeta Parra, "Thanks to Life."