

**Sub-regional Meeting on Pandemic Influenza Preparedness and Response:
Caribbean Experience and Lessons Learned**

Opening Remarks

by

*Dr. Bernadette Theodore-Gandi**

I would like to bring you greetings on behalf of our Director, Dr. Mirta Roses Periago, the Office of Caribbean Program Coordination of the Pan American Health Organization based in Barbados, and myself. We are very pleased to host this meeting in collaboration with the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency and other partners including USAID, CIDA and US North COM.

Over the next three days, we will be together to review the Caribbean response to H1N1. A lot can be said about all the work that we have done in the last three years preparing for a pandemic influenza. National pandemic influenza plans were elaborated; rapid investigation and containment teams were trained; simulation exercises carried out, etc. and at no other time in history have countries been so prepared to face a new disease as this time. ***But were we prepared for a crisis?*** This is the central question of this workshop. While a lot has been achieved a lot still needs to be done.

During the coming three days, close to ninety professionals from almost all the Caribbean countries and territories -- from international organizations; Disaster offices and American colleagues -- will be looking at:

- The achievements to date in this effort to be better prepared for potential crisis;
- The challenges we faced in responding to the H1N1 influenza virus, especially the challenges that coordination units at national level face to ensure that the disease knowledge is translated to the society in a way that is practical and empowering;
- Reflecting how the events evolved and what are the lessons we take from it; and
- Identifying what ought to be done next, to avoid potential chaos that can come from the emergence of new epidemics.

From where we sit in the health sector, no other situation puts us in such a spotlight as the one we just went through -- as Ministries of Health; as Permanent Secretaries, as Disaster Offices; as countries heavily dependent on tourism.

**Opening Remarks delivered by Dr. Bernadette Theodore-Gandi, MB, B.Ch, MPH, FFPH, DTM&H, Caribbean Program Coordinator, PAHO/WHO, on behalf of the Pan American Health Organization at the Sub-Regional Meeting on Pandemic Influenza Preparedness and Response: Caribbean Experience and Lessons Learned, September 9 – 11, 2009 at the Barbados Hilton Hotel, St. Michael, Barbados.*

We have to recognize that while a potential crisis can be generated by a health condition and health needs, we have to admit that the health sector alone will not be able to address an emergency of the magnitude of that which affected Mexico. The Health sector is central to the leadership of H1N1 pandemic response. It must coordinate and provide the main advice but it is the entire society that should respond.

Ministries of Health can be easily overwhelmed by such a major event. One of the critical issues that the Pandemic has shown us is the need for regionalization. This was clearly demonstrated with the cruise ship industry and the clear need for harmonization of regulations/policies regarding the management of ships with persons infected with H1N1.

The multi sector collaboration and the coordination needed to respond to H1N1 or to other viruses with pandemic potential is unquestionable. When there is poor coordination what is at stake are the lives of many people and the economic viability of countries.

So we invite you to engage in the discussions because this workshop is about protecting the health of you, me, our children and our families.

Welcome.