



58th DIRECTING COUNCIL

72nd SESSION OF THE REGIONAL COMMITTEE OF WHO FOR THE AMERICAS

Virtual Session, 28-29 September 2020

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**OPENING REMARKS BY HON. ALEX M. AZAR II
SECRETARY OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA**

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Thank you, Director Etienne, Deputy Director Valdez, and PAHO for inviting me to address today's meeting.

I want to offer my congratulations to Deputy Director Valdez on your appointment earlier this year.

We are all disappointed that we cannot all gather together physically in Washington, but I want to welcome you to the virtual 58th Directing Council nonetheless.

Today, we as leaders of the Americas face a health challenge unprecedented in our lifetimes. COVID-19 has caused death and economic destruction in all of our countries. But we will continue to combat the pandemic together, in the spirit of family and the spirit of the Americas.

Consider the foresight of our predecessors more than 100 years ago, when they created the first international health organization: the Pan American Sanitary Bureau.

It was the leaders of the Americas who first recognized that we can only defeat infectious diseases with cooperation across borders, that your health problems are our health problems, and that we are in this together.

Just a few years later, the 1918 flu took the lives of tens of millions. Back then, information about diseases could not be quickly or easily communicated worldwide. Today, with scientific and communications advances, this is a challenge that should have been resolved.

But, tragically, critical information about COVID-19 was not shared in the early days of the outbreak, when steps could have been taken to stop the virus where it emerged in China.

There is no doubt that, if the virus had emerged in an open and free society, like the United States or most countries in our Hemisphere, we would not be in the situation we are in today.

As we assemble today for the Directing Council, hundreds of thousands of lives have been lost in our hemisphere. Sadly, even as the response continues, some countries are seeking to exploit this tragedy to expand their access to markets and their political or security influence in the region.

That is not how the United States will act—we will extend a helping hand to all in need. We will continue to be, as we have been throughout the post-war era, the largest humanitarian and global health donor on earth. Within that work, our own Hemisphere is always a priority.

The United States is developing countermeasures for COVID-19 through President Trump's Operation Warp Speed, including six vaccine candidates that we've supported in clinical trials. The vaccines that are successful will be safe, effective, and assessed against the gold standard of our Food and Drug Administration. Once the needs of our own people are met, expected surplus will be available to our partners and friends in the Americas.

We have already sent tens of millions of dollars in development assistance to help fight the pandemic, as well as technical assistance, to at least 24 countries around the Americas. We also recently partnered with PAHO on lessons learned and capacities built during the regional response to COVID-19.

No one in the Americas is safe from this virus until everyone in the Americas is safe. We all are counting on PAHO's resolve to be transparent, accountable, and impartial. That is how to lead in the fight against COVID-19: through open and transparent cooperation with all ministries in the hemisphere.

We were so pleased that this past year has also seen important reforms within PAHO to increase transparency and accountability, particularly on programs funded by voluntary contributions.

The United States welcomes such reforms, and we thank Dr. Etienne, her leadership team, and the many fellow member states that supported this effort. We look forward to working with member states and PAHO leadership for more improvements in the near future to ensure the institution is even more effective and accountable.

As we open the Directing Council and undertake the important work of PAHO, let us recommit to the spirit that launched health cooperation in the Americas: the open and honest spirit we need to protect us all from disease.

Together, we can make every country of the Americas healthier, safer, and more prosperous.

Thank you.
