



59th DIRECTING COUNCIL

73rd SESSION OF THE REGIONAL COMMITTEE OF WHO FOR THE AMERICAS

Virtual Session, 20-24 September 2021

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**WELCOMING REMARKS BY DR. CARISSA F. ETIENNE
DIRECTOR OF THE PAN AMERICAN SANITARY BUREAU
AND REGIONAL DIRECTOR FOR THE AMERICAS OF THE
WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION**

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**59th Directing Council of PAHO
73rd Session of the WHO Regional Committee for the Americas**

Outgoing President of the 58th Directing Council, Honorable Dr. Fernando Ruiz Gomez,
Minister of Health and Social Protection of Colombia
President of Chile, Your Excellency Mr. Sebastian Pinera
Secretary of Health and Human Services of the United States of America,
Honorable Xavier Becerra
Secretary General of the Organization of American States, Honorable Luis Almagro Lemes
President of the Inter-American Development Bank, Honorable Mauricio Claver-Carone
Director-General of the World Health Organization, Honorable Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus
Honorable Ministers and Secretaries of Health of Member States
of the Pan American Health Organization
Distinguished Member State Delegates
Eminent Members of the Diplomatic Corps
Representatives of Nongovernmental Organizations in formal relationships with
the Pan American Health Organization
Representatives of the United Nations and Other Specialized Agencies
Fellow PAHO and WHO colleagues
Honored guests
Esteemed Ladies and Gentlemen

A very good morning to you all.

I am pleased to extend a very warm welcome to all of you, to the 59th Directing Council of the Pan American Health Organization.

I am particularly pleased to greet the distinguished President of Chile, the Secretary of Health and Human Services of the United States and the President of the Inter-American Development Bank to this health forum.

I especially welcome all first-time attendees of the meetings of the Governing Bodies of PAHO.

I must express my genuine thanks to all Member States for their steadfast and unwavering commitment to our joint quest to improve the health and well-being of all peoples in the Americas, particularly, during this very complicated and challenging time.

Before proceeding further, I would also like to take this opportunity to extend our deepest condolences to the people of Haiti on the tragic loss of life resulting from the 7.2 magnitude earthquake, which occurred on the 14th of August 2021. Regrettably, we note that the destruction of property, displacement of families and businesses, and disruption of lives were further complicated by ravages of Tropical Storm Grace. We stand in solidarity with you, our Haitian friends, as you rebuild and recover.

Sadly, for us in the Secretariat, we also mourn the untimely loss of a member of staff, Dr. Ousmane Touré, an International PAHO Consultant, whose young life was snuffed out by the earthquake in Haiti. On behalf of the Secretariat, Member States, and the entire PAHO family, I wish to convey our heartfelt sympathy to his wife and children in Guinea.

We are meeting today amidst the unrelenting and tragic march of the global COVID-19 pandemic, which as of Friday the 17th of September 2021, had claimed more than 2.16 million lives in the Region of the Americas, with 87.6 million cases having been recorded. The mind struggles to comprehend the sheer enormity of these statistics and our hearts strain under the weight of so much loss. The Secretariat extends our deepest sympathies to the families, friends and communities who have suffered such profound consequences of COVID 19.

Honorable Delegates, the agenda of this 59th Directing Council has been primarily constructed around some of the critical lessons, lessons which we have learned from the COVID-19 pandemic, and with a keen eye to building a better future. Our inability to readily source and procure personal protective equipment, ventilators, vaccines, oxygen, medicines such as antiretrovirals and other essential health technologies, heightened our vulnerabilities and severely compromised our pandemic response. However, this alarming circumstance has galvanized us into recognizing the obligatory need for regional self-sufficiency in health technologies.

On this path towards regional self-sufficiency, PAHO recently launched a platform to boost regional vaccine production efforts and I am happy to report that the Inter-American Development Bank, the World Bank, and other partners have already expressed an interest in collaborating with us to advance this agenda.

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the need for rapid adoption of digital solutions in public health. Information systems and digital health solutions that were accessible and ready to use, proved indispensable for the delivery of care at all levels of the health system. Digital solutions will also be key to post-pandemic recovery and rebuilding, and will require systemic changes to drive innovation.

The emergence and spill-over of the SARS-Corona 2 virus into human populations, and the consequent global pandemic should leave us with no doubt that the adoption of a One Health Approach is even more critical now, given the shrinking global village in which we live. The One Health proposal will allow for greater coordination, collaboration, policy coherence and engagement across the different sectors of human, animal, plant, and environmental health.

Extensive deforestation and destruction of sylvatic habitats, as well as numerous other activities, have intensified the contact between animals, people, and disease agents. Let us not forget in this Region, the costly yellow fever outbreak in Brazil in 2016 to 2019. While countries of necessity focused on the COVID response over the past eighteen months, certain essential public health programs—such as immunization, cancer, malaria, HIV and TB, and maternal health—were disrupted with important negative impacts.

What is noteworthy is that after every disaster, be it a natural disaster, a major disease outbreak like Ebola or a financial crisis, we all reaffirm our commitment to building resilient health systems. And sadly, if nothing else, this pandemic has demonstrated that our continuing failure to deliver on this commitment, does indeed carry a high price tag in terms of the millions of lives lost and economies that are destroyed!

I want to urge us all, to invest in our health systems and swiftly ensure their transformation so they have the capacity to respond to the needs of all people, every day and to better respond to pandemics and other disasters when they do occur.

Over the next several days, this honorable assembly will also discuss and deliberate on other agenda items, including the Financial Report of the Director, matters related to the collection of Assessed Quota Contributions, and Strengthening of PAHO and WHO Preparedness for and Response to Health Emergencies, among others.

It is my sincere hope that these varied deliberations will converge and intersect at one common and enduring objective—that is, that of saving lives and improving the health and well-being of the peoples of the Americas.

Distinguished Delegates, your boldest and most creative ideas will be required as we convene for this weeklong exchange and decision making. We must work in a spirit of solidarity and ensure that equity remains central to our ideas and policy recommendations, so we will truly leave no one behind as we rebuild and recover from the unprecedented catastrophic occurrences in our lifetime.

Thank you very much and once again, a very warm welcome to you all.

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