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**OPENING REMARKS BY MR. LUIS ALMAGRO LEMES, SECRETARY-GENERAL
OF THE ORGANIZATION OF AMERICAN STATES**

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It is always a great pleasure to visit Dr. Carissa Etienne, and today I am particularly gratified to have this opportunity to meet with all of you. From the perspective of our slogan for the next five years, “More rights for more people,” the health and well-being of our population is central to the rights and equity agenda. Access to health is a basic right, and together we must make its enjoyment a reality in our Hemisphere. Authorities of the Americas and friends, the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health is a basic right of every human being.

The divide between people who have access to proper health services and those who, because of their income, do not is an unacceptable inequity. Health is necessary for inclusion, social cohesion, and economic growth in which prosperity is shared by all. Our challenge is how to take these rights and put them into practice. In our Region, 27% of the population does not have regular access to health services, and 46% lacks comprehensive health insurance--an enormous economic, social, and human toll, not only for those who are unserved, but for society as a whole.

Universal insurance does not constitute progress from the standpoint of the individual who has access to health services, but rather is a more cost-effective model for society as a whole. It is therefore essential that we engage in dialogue and reach agreements on the main health challenges our Region is facing. To that end, the OAS and PAHO have taken specific steps together with the Member Countries to improve public policies and build the capacity of country institutions to provide better services to the citizens of the Hemisphere.

Such collaboration has been seen on issues ranging from drug abuse and information and communications technology for improving child health and well-being, to the social determinants of health, among other areas. With the recent approval of the Plan of Action of the Social Charter of the Americas, of which you are well aware, it is crucial that our two organizations continue to deepen these ties of ongoing collaboration on critical issues facing the Hemisphere.

Coordinating our actions will enable us to make headway, for example, toward universal health coverage within the framework of the Inter-American Social Protection Network. As you know, PAHO and the World Bank are already working together on this, and we would like to offer up our knowledge and experience so that this also becomes a joint collaboration between PAHO and the OAS.

Health care for women should be foremost on our agendas. Inequity hits women in the Americas particularly hard in terms of poverty, unemployment, low wages, and death due to lack of access to health care, because they are not able to exercise their right to public health care. This is a human rights issue and, as such, demands action and an immediate, strong response. We must also work together on the environment agenda. Without baselines on health issues, we will never be able to adequately measure our impact on air, water, and soil, and their impact on us. Environmental policy, health, and human rights must work hand in hand to solve these issues.

Let us together implement this three-pronged approach in the Americas. Every year around 4.5 million people die from noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) in our Region, with smoking being one of the main risk factors. No “market right” can be above a public right like health. For this reason, the Inter-American Task Force on NCDs has been established. Moreover, since persons 60 and over represent 14% of the population in the Americas, I would like to highlight the close collaboration between PAHO and the OAS in moving to protect the rights of older adults, especially in the wake of the recent adoption of the Inter-American Convention on Protecting the Human Rights of Older Persons. This pioneering regulatory framework affords us an excellent opportunity to continue working together.

“More rights for more people” is much more than a slogan: it embodies a response to inequity in our Hemisphere. It means that citizens can truly exercise rights, like health, that should not exist on paper alone, but rather should be enjoyed by all.

Thank you very much.

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