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**ADDRESS OF THE FIRST LADY OF THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC,
DR. MARGARITA CEDEÑO DE FERNÁNDEZ
ON ELIMINATION OF RUBELLA AND
CONGENITAL RUBELLA SYNDROME IN THE AMERICAS**

**ADDRESS OF THE FIRST LADY OF THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC,
DR. MARGARITA CEDEÑO DE FERNÁNDEZ, ON HER DESIGNATION AS
THE PAN AMERICAN HEALTH ORGANIZATION'S AMBASSADOR FOR THE
ELIMINATION OF RUBELLA AND CONGENITAL RUBELLA SYNDROME
IN THE AMERICAS**

Washington, D.C, 1 October 2007

When Englishman Edward Jenner invented the first vaccine, against smallpox, no one could imagine what it would mean for humanity as the first link in a chain of scientific discovery that has prevented the spread of viruses, controlled epidemics, and eradicated diseases, thus preventing widespread suffering, sequelae, and deaths.

Thanks to vaccines, today we can protect individuals against infections and illnesses but, even more importantly, we can anticipate, diminish, and prevent risks to the entire community by controlling diseases that, like polio, measles, diphtheria, tetanus, and rubella, sow despair, disability, and loss of life when mass vaccination strategies and epidemiological surveillance systems are not implemented as measures to stop their spread.

That is why in the Dominican Republic, the government headed by my husband, Dr. Leonel Fernández Reyna, under the direction of our efficient and indefatigable Secretary of State for Public Health and Social Welfare, Dr. Bautista Rojas Gómez, has prioritized immunization programs, making them a fundamental part of a health policy that stresses prevention as a strategy to care for the population and protect it from preventable illnesses and afflictions.

As my Nation's First Lady, I have taken on the mission of supporting the continuous improvement of public health in the Dominican Republic, investing in the places where health services are provided, promoting compassionate care in these services, and educating the people about healthy behaviors. For this purpose, we have joined forces with the vaccination programs, conducting education campaigns to ensure that every Dominican family is aware that a simple vaccine can make the difference between a truncated or limited life and a full life.

As a result of that work, we find ourselves today in this exalted gathering, describing our experiences and the progress made in the Region, in compliance with the resolution adopted at the 44th Directing Council of this Organization in 2003. I hope that these experiences will serve as encouragement for the elimination of rubella, congenital rubella syndrome, and measles in the Hemisphere.

Last year, our country launched a sweeping rubella vaccination campaign, achieving complete coverage of the male and female population aged 7 to 39.

Rubella in the Dominican Republic and other countries of the Americas is already history; we now have the guarantee that each developing life will be free from infection with that virus, provided that we maintain surveillance to prevent its reintroduction while the disease is still present in the Hemisphere and the rest of the world.

And this is a real challenge, since thanks to the Hemisphere's immunization activities, each year we have been able to prevent some 20,000 cases of congenital rubella syndrome in the Americas; if the rubella elimination activities had not taken place, each infected patient would have represented an expenditure of roughly US\$ 60,000 dollars in direct and indirect costs, not counting the consequent serious sequelae, such as blindness, deafness, and heart defects and their impact on families and society as a whole.

Today, I am here with you as a citizen of the Americas who is raising her voice in the fight to eliminate rubella and any other virus for which there is a vaccine forever in this Hemisphere.

In this 21st century, when technology has made extraordinary advances in medicine possible, to the point where a small device injected into the human body can detect anomalous cell growth, we can consider it neither acceptable nor just that some human beings still get sick and die for lack of a vaccine that should be available to all.

Health must be guaranteed to all humanity as an inalienable right, without discrimination of any type. I therefore believe that progress in the medical sciences is only effective and only extraordinary when it serves the community.

In this globalized world virtually without borders, the eradication of endemic diseases cannot be confined to a single country, region, or continent, but has global dimensions. Thus, it has become increasingly necessary that all citizens of the world be aware of what not having a vaccine accessible to everyone who needs it means.

I therefore call on our governments, through you, the Secretaries and Ministers of Health of all the nations of the Hemisphere, my fellow First Ladies, international cooperation agencies, the media, academia, churches, nongovernmental organizations, and the population at large, to redouble your efforts and join together to eradicate rubella and other vaccine-preventable diseases in the Americas once and for all. I would also like to encourage all of you to collaborate and provide special support to our sister country, Haiti, to offer it all your unconditional assistance and collaboration for the campaign that is beginning this year; to make a commitment to continue collaborating and implementing the cooperation efforts that we have already begun in order to seek common solutions to our countries' health problems.

In conclusion, I would like to thank the Pan American Health Organization and its Director, Dr. Mirta Roses Periago, for all the interest, friendship, and support provided to our country through its excellent Representative, Dr. Cristina Nogueira, always assisting us in the work of caring for and preserving the most valued and important of nonrenewable resource, health.

To you, the health authorities of the Americas, my sincerest congratulations on your achievements in these rubella and measles vaccination campaigns, which we will have the opportunity to see in the video "Rubella Elimination in the Americas: A Challenge and a Reality" at the conclusion of my

remarks. Here you will see the record figures in the history of immunization, which I hope will always be your motivation and point of departure for the sustained effort required to make the Americas and the world a healthy place.

At this Pan American Sanitary Conference, the supreme Governing Body of the Pan American Health Organization, I would like to express my most profound and heartfelt desire and my commitment to all the peoples of the Americas to work for a more just and equitable Hemisphere, where all citizens can enjoy the opportunity to be free from rubella and any other preventable disease.

Then, let us extend our hands to our brothers and sisters on other continents to ensure that the cry of a newborn baby boy or girl always represents a cry of hope and joy, because it is the beginning of a new life that is healthy and full of opportunities. And, paraphrasing John Lennon's song ***Imagine***, we will tell the world: *You may say I am a dreamer, but I am not the only one, I hope someday you will join us, and the World will live "healthy" as one.*

Thank you very much