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**ADDRESS BY THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY GENERAL OF
THE ORGANIZATION OF AMERICAN STATES
AMBASSADOR ALBERT R. RAMDIN**

**REMARKS BY THE OAS ASSISTANT SECRETARY GENERAL,
AMBASSADOR ALBERT R. RAMDIN**

**AT THE INAUGURAL SESSION OF THE
27TH PAN AMERICAN SANITARY CONFERENCE**

Washington, D.C., 1 October 2007

It is indeed a great pleasure and a distinct honor for me to join you here today and address this 27th Pan American Sanitary Conference in representation of the Organization of American States.

Secretary General José Miguel Insulza, who, because of previous engagements, cannot be here today, sends his best wishes for a fruitful Conference.

We recognize that this forum is an important encounter that brings together the highest authorities on health in the Western Hemisphere in one of the most senior and respected institutions of our inter-American system.

My participation in this Conference testifies to the close ties that exist between the OAS and PAHO, which extend far beyond our common allegiance to the inter-American system. Indeed, in recent years our agendas have intertwined with greater intensity thanks to the recognition that health, like other social development priorities have to be linked to the region's political agenda.

There are two fundamental reasons for this change: first of all the inseparability of issues regarding democracy, integral development and multidimensional security and secondly, the need to coordinate inter-sectoral policies in order to achieve higher levels of development and well-being. The first has to do with the political role of the OAS to contribute in a meaningful way to the establishment and nurturing of peaceful societies, healthy populations and prosperous economies, while the second refers to its integral development concerns and objectives, which are aligned with the UN Millennium Development Goals.

In our view, the political dimension is central to the formulation and execution of public policies. This dimension includes social dialogue, democratic participation, political negotiation, and the quest for points of consensus regarding the implementation of our development plans and agendas. At the heart of this dimension is the very concept of democratic governance, good governance and the legitimacy of our systems of

government.

In my view an effective functioning democracy is indispensable for defining our development agendas, for implementing these objectives through legitimate and capable institutions, for achieving the minimum consensus required for life in society, and for listening to and channeling the interests of all our stakeholders. But, above, all, a solid democracy is essential for guaranteeing that the benefits and opportunities for growth and progress are distributed equitable and, in particular, reach the most marginalized and vulnerable groups in our countries.

The OAS is committed to strengthening democracy in the region in the spirit of the provisions of the Inter-American Democratic Charter. This Charter recognizes that democracy, integral development, and multi-dimensional security are inter-dependent and mutual reinforcing.

On the other hand, our governments have recognized, at the national and hemispheric levels, the necessity of working to coordinate and integrate social, labor, and economic policies if they are truly to bring about development and well-being for our citizens.

We have welcomed and taken good note of the discussions at the highest political level in the Caribbean Community on Chronic non-communicable diseases. In my view, these discussions are critical in terms of the broad acceptance, a strong commitment and speedy implementation of action oriented decisions. I repeat my offer of two days ago to host, in close collaboration with PAHO and the subregional entities, a conference at the OAS on non-communicable diseases and the impact this has on the labor market as well as on the national budgets in terms of health costs in the Americas.

Health priorities and programs touch upon numerous other areas of integral development, such as education, labor, and the environment; all are priorities for the Organization of American States. Under this inter-sectoral approach, we recently worked with PAHO on matters of occupational health and safety, health education and nutrition, and assistance to persons with disabilities, as well as organizing joint meetings on HIV/Aids and Avian Flu. We were also pleased to include the launching of the Health Agenda of the Americas in the past OAS General Assembly in Panama City.

Moreover, in September of this year, the OAS signed an agreement with the United Nations World Food Programme. It involves joint efforts to fight hunger and malnutrition among children and to strengthen means of responding to social emergencies and natural disasters in the region.

In the proposed 2008–2012 strategic plan, Dr. Roses draws upon lessons learned from experience, emphasizing that health and well-being in the Americas require not only a strong political commitment but also the integration of development and health policies. We fully share and support these views of the Director of PAHO.

The impact of PAHO's efforts to improve the health and well-being of our peoples is unquestionable. However, with an integrated approach to social policy, one can succeed not only in addressing challenges in a specific area but also in bringing more people out of extreme poverty and marginalization.

An overview of the region in recent years provides hope. Since 2003, Latin America and the Caribbean have been able to maintain a significant economic growth rate and their rates of poverty, indigence, and unemployment have dropped. Furthermore, over the past two years there have been more elections than ever before in the history of the region, including presidential and parliamentary elections, referendums and other methods of consulting the populace, and municipal elections. All of them were peaceful, clean, and inclusive; they all helped to consolidate the region's democracies and strengthen the rule of law.

All this progress allows us to strengthen the foundations of a political and institutional system that is essential if we are to address the enormous challenges that still lie ahead. The fact remains that, despite the progress I have outlined, approximately 40 percent of the population of our region still lives in poverty and about 16 percent live in dire poverty.

What is truly unacceptable is the fact that, in addition to being so poor, our region has the greatest inequality on Earth. The poorest 20 percent of the populations of our countries takes home between 2.8 percent and 8.8 percent of national income, while the richest quintile helps itself to between 42.8 percent and 64 percent. And underlying those figures is an even more perverse reality: discrimination. A great majority of indigenous people are poor, as are a significant number of persons of African descent. Women head many of the poor households in the region. In this regard, I am afraid that I have to concur with Secretary General Insulza who some time ago regretfully had to point out that poverty in Latin America has both a color and a gender bias.

The challenges that lie ahead are immense. To meet them, we need vigorous democracies; we need government policies capable of a collective response to the most pressing needs of our peoples. We also need more collaboration and coordination among the international and regional organizations in support of the Member States. In the inter-American system, we have made visible progress between the Inter-American

Development Bank, the Pan American Health Organization, the Inter-American Institute for Agriculture and the Organization of American States in terms of coordination, joint activities and preventing duplication of efforts. At the national level more inter-departmental coordination is required, as well as the need to engage in a meaningful the civil society, trade unions and the private sector.

Finally, let me reiterate that the Organization of American States regards health challenges as cross-border in nature, and as such no country alone or in isolation can effectively address these problems. To be successful in our efforts a coordinated and collective response is necessary; a holistic and multidimensional approach is required to achieve the best results. The OAS, as the main political vehicle and multilateral platform in the Americas stands ready to facilitate such an approach by including health in the political agenda of the Western Hemisphere.

Thank you very much for your attention.