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Director, PAHO ·
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HEALTH IN THE INTER-AMERICAN SYSTEM
(Washington, D.C.)**

Your Excellency President Vicente Fox
Mr. Secretary General of the OAS
Mr. President of the Inter-American Development Bank
Members of the Permanent Council
Ladies and gentlemen

First let me add my words of welcome to you Mr. President and let me congratulate Ambassador Cabañas for this most innovative idea of presenting to you an inter-american vision of some of the problems that confront us in the Americas, and some of the possible solutions as well. I will restrict myself to our health, which is the essential *raison d'être* of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), and a fundamental part of the social agenda of the Americas. I am sure, Mr. President, that you know that your country has been intimately involved in and an active supporter of this Organization ever since it was founded. Next year we will celebrate our 100th anniversary and we will recall that it was at a panamerican congress in Mexico in 1900, that the republics of the Americas resolved to create the inter-american health institution that is now PAHO.

We have continued to stress panamericanism as one of the fundamental principles that guide our work. History continues to show that the countries of the Americas can achieve great things in health when they work together, and we continue to believe that the institutions of the Inter-American System can assist them in achieving even greater things.

I will briefly describe some of these achievements that demonstrate this joint action of our countries and show how in spite of all the problems that have beset us, our health status continues to improve. I will give average figures for the Americas and begin with some indicators on child health. Our infant mortality rate is 25 per 1000 live births and this figure represents a decline of 30% over the past 15 years. Except for a minor outbreak of paralysis due to a mutation in the vaccine administered, this Region has been free of poliomyelitis for the past 10 years. Measles, which is a major cause of child morbidity and mortality, has disappeared in almost all our countries. The nutrition of our

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children has improved and we see few of the gross cases of childhood malnutrition that was the scourge of our countries decades ago. The blindness that results from deficiency of Vitamin A is seldom seen. Our countries have seen their life expectancy increase by 3.4 years over the past 15 years. Very few mothers die in childbirth and the number of children per mother continues to fall. These, and other results that demonstrate improving health, are a living tribute to the heroic efforts of the health workers of the Americas and the genuine spirit of cooperation and collaboration among countries.

We have also seen the results of inter-american cooperation in these advances. The Inter-American Development Bank was an important participant in the fight against poliomyelitis. That collaboration has intensified as President Iglesias and I have signed with the World Bank, what we describe as a “Shared Agenda” for health development in the Americas in which we have already begun collaborative action in support of our countries.

But I would not wish to give the impression of triumphalism and that there are not serious problems confronting us. A major problem that we face is the inequality in health outcomes that, because it is unnecessary and unjust, we denote as inequity. There are unacceptable differences among our countries and within our countries. There are differences between rural and urban populations, between the indigenous and nonindigenous populations, and there are differences between the sexes that we think represent inequity. There are deficiencies in coverage by the health services, and far too many of our people are exposed to catastrophic expenditures that ensue when they fall ill. The scourge of HIV/AIDS threatens to undo many of the health gains we have made, as especially in Latin America and the Caribbean, the epidemic shows no sign of abating.

All of our countries are engaged in processes of reform of their health services to correct these deficiencies and just two days ago, we had the pleasure of hearing your Secretary of Health, Dr. Julio Frenk, explain to us the imaginative and innovative approaches your government is taking to address some of these problems. I particularly warmed to the fact that you have put equity as one of your main goals---a goal that is echoed in all of our countries. We heard Dr. Frenk describe eloquently five major health objectives of your government:

- Improve the health conditions of the Mexican people.
- Reduce the inequalities in health.
- Guarantee proper treatment in the public and private health services.
- Ensure fairness in health financing.
- Strengthen the health system, especially public institutions.

The threats to our health do not always come from microbes. They also come from the disasters to which our Region is prone, and this is one area in which panamerican solidarity is ever evident. It is one in which the Inter-American System, under the leadership of Secretary César Gaviria, has been extremely active in seeking to find the synergy of a coordinated response through the Inter-American Committee on Natural Disaster Reduction.

We are also pleased at the role health, as an area of common concern, has played in the Summits of the Americas, and we in PAHO have taken seriously the mandates of the heads of government. We commit ourselves to continue to support the process to the best of our ability.

We are acutely conscious of the economic difficulties our Region is facing, and sometimes have to comfort colleagues that do not have the same optimism that we have about the resilience of the countries of the Americas. We take some pride that the systems established in our countries in relatively good times can withstand moments of crisis, and we will continue to see improvement in our health situation.

But Mr. President, in the midst of my optimism about the present and future of our countries, I cannot help but vent my concern for the health situation in Haiti. I have just returned from that country and am convinced that we have a collective responsibility to assist in improving the health situation there. I am not insensitive to the political problems, but at the same time I am haunted by the fact that for every 1000 babies born, five mothers die. That is about 100 times worse than the situation in the best of our countries. I have decided that we must make a special effort in this area, and have the hope or dream that collective concern for health may form a platform for understanding among those who now manifest differences.

Mr. President, ladies and gentlemen, I thank you for your attention and invite you to say, as the heads of government of the CARICOM countries recently declared—"the health of our Region is the wealth of our Region."