



Opening Session of the 2017 Washington Model OAS General Assembly

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"The role of the OAS in the attainment of More Rights for More People in the Americas"

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Good afternoon!

It is my great pleasure to welcome you to the House of the Americas, a space that is not only rich in history, but one that is symbolic of the highest engagement among the 34 active member states of the OAS on crosscutting matters of national and hemispheric interest, including the most pressing political issues which confront our hemisphere.

Your presence here speaks to your commitment as young persons to honing leadership skills and embracing the tenet of democracy as a fundamental principle for improving the lives of the people of the Americas. It also signals the way forward, on this trajectory, to your continued contribution to the building of our nations as you acquire and strengthen useful skill-sets for productive dialogue and consensus building as MOAS participants.

The core ethos of the OAS is to work for the continued improvement in the lives of citizens of the Americas by strengthening deliverables across the Organization's four pillars: Democracy, Human Rights, Integral Development, and Security.

Education is a vital component of the fostering of economic development, social equity and security in any democratic society. The OAS collaborates with its Member States to ensure that people of the Americas can access all of their rights, including the right to education. The Model General Assembly (MOAS) is a powerful educational tool that offers collegiate students a unique opportunity to learn about the countries of the Americas and the work of the Organization. It is a valuable, hands-on exercise that has been created for you, the future leaders of our hemisphere, to create a world in which people's rights are recognized and respected.

Participating in the MOAS entails developing an understanding about the hemispheric issues related to the topics on the agenda and the work of the OAS in confronting these issues. Understanding the scope and depth of the problems affecting our hemisphere prepares you to face the challenges that affect our nations and to work towards practical solutions towards a more just world.

The OAS is fully committed to the attainment of more rights for more people. Its engagement with the Member States and with Civil Society, and the emphasis placed on the building of consensus around policies that address the inequities faced by vulnerable communities and marginalized peoples form the basis of the Organization's work in the Americas. I will briefly touch on some of the topics you will debate during this Model exercise, and then to present some examples of advances by the Organization in the areas of human rights, democracy, security and integral development.

1. Plan of action for the Decade for Persons of African Descent in the Americas:

The UN General Assembly proclaimed the years 2015-2024 as the International Decade for People of African Descent (resolution 68/237) stating the need to strengthen national, regional and international cooperation in relation to the full enjoyment of economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights by people of African descent, and their full and equal participation in all aspects of society.

According to various international and regional organizations, there are some 150-200 million persons of African descent in the Americas¹. Persons of African descent are among the most vulnerable groups in the Hemisphere as a result of poverty, underdevelopment, social exclusion, and economic disparities which are closely associated with racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance.

On June 14, 2016 at our annual General Assembly, the OAS adopted the 2016-2025 Plan of action for the Decade for Persons of African Descent in the Americas outlining the actions needed to recognize, promote, protect, and observe the rights of persons of African descent in the Americas. Since its adoption, the OAS has held several events

¹ AG/RES. 2891 (XLVI-O/16) PLAN OF ACTION FOR THE DECADE FOR PERSONS OF AFRICAN DESCENT IN THE AMERICAS (2016-2025) available at <http://www.oas.org/en/sare/documents/res-2891-16-en.pdf>

to bring awareness on this topic, including holding events in honour of Black History Month and the International Day of Remembrance for Victims of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and Slavery.

2. Assessment of the situation of refugee and migrant families and unaccompanied children in the Hemisphere:

Migrant workers and their families are another especially vulnerable sector of society, often subjected to abuse and violations of their basic rights. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) Special Rapporteurship on Migrant Workers and Members of their Families was established to raise awareness of the human rights of migrant workers and their families, to formulate recommendations regarding the protection and promotion of their rights, and to act promptly when there is a violation of these rights in any OAS Member State.

Addressing the situation of unaccompanied children entering the US continues to be an urgent human rights issue. During US fiscal year 2014, the US Border Patrol apprehended a total of 68,541 unaccompanied children and 68,445 families, which represented a 77% increase in the number of arrivals of unaccompanied children and a 361% increase in families over fiscal year 2013². The majority were crossing the US southwest border coming from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico.

It is a situation which is of utmost concern to the OAS Member States and continues to be an item for deliberation in the Organization's political bodies.

3. Strengthening political participation in the Americas:

The OAS' goal to strengthen democracy in the region has translated into many achievements:

- Since 1962, the OAS has deployed more than 240 Electoral Observation Missions in 27 of the 34 Member States, including the US. More than 5000 international observers participated in these Missions.
- Since 2008, the OAS has supported the issuance of 19 million birth certificates and/or identification cards in 19 member states through the Universal Civil Identity Project of the Americas (PUICA)

² INTER-AMERICAN COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS 2015 REPORT: "Human Rights Situation of Refugee and Migrant Families and Unaccompanied Children in the United States of America" available at: <https://www.oas.org/en/iachr/reports/pdfs/Refugees-Migrants-US.pdf>

- The OAS has helped to reduce the rate of under-registration of births in the region, from 18% (2005) to 8% (2015)

4. Judicial reforms for alternatives to incarceration in addressing the drug problem:

The OAS Report on the Drug Problem in the Americas opened the debate on the importance of addressing drug dependence as a chronic and relapsing disease that must be treated as a public health issue.

In 2015, the Executive Secretariat of the Commission for the Control of Drug Abuse (CICAD) of the OAS released the technical report on "*Alternatives to Incarceration for drug-related Offenses.*" The report advocates that the search for alternatives to incarceration, and makes the case for more effectively addressing public health problems associated with illicit drug use, so as to provide a more humane and effective response to drug-related crimes. It also argues that promotes public safety and citizen security by advocating for prioritizing use of public resources in the fight against organized crime.

5. Stockpile management and monitoring of illicit manufacturing of and trafficking in firearms:

In 1997, Member States adopted the Inter-American Convention against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms, Ammunition, Explosives and Other Related Materials (CIFTA) as the first instrument to prevent, combat and eradicate this illicit trade.

- From 2009 to 2014, the OAS has provided firearms marking equipment and machines for database maintenance, and thus facilitated the tracing of illicit weapons seized by national authorities
- Since 2007, through its Assistance Program for the Control of Arms and Ammunition (PACAM), the OAS has supported the destruction of 7.1 million rounds of ammunition and some 62,500 firearms

6. Consolidation of the Program of Action for the Decade of the Americas for the Rights and Dignity of Persons with Disabilities:

The Department of Social Inclusion (DIS) is responsible for promoting both *The Inter-American Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Persons*

with Disabilities, the first normative legal instrument on the issue, which focused on human rights (1999), as well as the 2006-2016 *Program of Action for the Decade of the Americas for the Rights and Dignity of Persons with Disabilities* (PAD).

The OAS continues to encourage each of the Member States to undertake social, political, economic and cultural programs, plans and actions towards the inclusion and full participation of persons with disabilities in all aspects of society, towards the end of providing them with equal opportunities.

7. Prevention of and punishment of violence against women in the hemisphere:

Latin America and the Caribbean is, according to the OECD, the region in the world that has made most progress in formally recognizing the rights of women. In 1994, the nations of the Americas made a great stride forward when they recognized violence against women as a human rights violation and adopted the “Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence against Women”—also known as the “*Convention of Belém do Pará*.” Today, 32 of the 34 member states of the OAS have ratified the Convention and committed to adopt measures to guarantee women a life free of violence and discrimination. The OAS, through the Inter-American Commission of Women (CIM), is strongly committed to supporting all the efforts of states to prevent, punish, and eradicate violence against women. This is fundamental to achieving more rights for more people and a world of peace, well-being and justice.

8. Climate change, food security and migration in the Americas:

Climate change has increased displacements and migration flows in the Americas, and as climate related phenomena have greatly impacted human mobility, governments have been prompted to include climate-change related migration issues in their policy frameworks³. The effects of climate change also have a cross-cutting impact on food security, since it affects food access and distribution. In addition, efforts to meet rising food demand have led to environmental degradation. Early warning systems, emergency preparedness, and risk management are among some of the measures needed to address this problem, and on which the OAS remains fully engaged.

Conclusion

The foregoing represents a few examples of the work of the OAS towards the formulation and implementation of policy for access to more rights for more people, undertaken in collaboration with the Member States.

³ CLIMATE CHANGE, FOOD SECURITY, AND MIGRATION IN THE AMERICAS Executive Summary. COMMITTEE ON MIGRATION ISSUES CIDI/CAM/doc.34/17

As you reflect on the topics which have been set for your discussion, I challenge you to also consider the role which you can play in advancing this process, and encourage you to position yourselves to become catalysts for the cultural, economic, social, and political development of our hemisphere. The contribution which you can make is not limited by your age, since each of us, as citizens of the Americas, is seized of the potential to be creative, to be constructive, to be socially responsible, to respect the rights of others, and to chart new courses for innovative responses to challenges in our schools and in our communities. It is, after all, about the choices we make in taking care of the environment, in embracing and maximizing opportunities for personal and academic development, in engaging in lifestyles which foster sustainable growth patterns for our people and our states, in acknowledging our own rights and responsibilities as citizens of the Americas.

The hemisphere needs all the help it can get, and the OAS is certainly doing its part, but there is always scope for finding even more creative approaches to confronting challenges associated with Drugs, Gangs, Climate Change, Migration, Security, Governance issues, Inequity, among other hemispheric challenges. As part of the largest demographic in the Americas, the youth must become the fount of innovative ideas and proactive engagement that build on traditional responses and inform new pathways. I challenge you further to be tenacious in your search for answers, and to be indefatigable in your efforts to make that difference. Together our efforts will clear the way forward to a hemisphere and a world in which citizens live the tangible reality of *More Rights for More People*.

I wish you every success in your deliberations, and trust that you will be so impacted by your participation in this MOAS that it will serve to inform your perspectives about your career options, and about your role in shaping a hemisphere in which all citizens are positioned to realize their fullest potential.

Thank you.
