

REMARKS BY OAS ASSISTANT SECRETARY GENERAL ALBERT
RAMDIN
AT THE OPENING CEREMONY OF THE INTER-AMERICAN CONGRESS
ON THE ENVIRONMENTAL RULE OF LAW

Montego Bay, Jamaica
March 30th and 31st, 2015

The Most Honorable Madam Prime Minister, our deep appreciation for your personal commitment to honor us with your presence at this milestone event in the middle of your busy schedule today. Excellencies, distinguished ladies and gentlemen,

It is privilege and an honor to be here in Montego Bay and to speak on behalf of the Organization of American States, many of which are represented here today, as a co-host of this historic First Inter-American Congress on the Environmental Rule of Law.

I want to sincerely thank our partners UNEP, the IUCN World Commission on Environmental Law, the Caribbean Court of Justice and the Government of Jamaica, represented by our esteemed friends Justice Antonio Benjamin, Madam Elizabeth Mrema, Sir Dennis Byron, for embracing this unique opportunity to discuss an issue of significant and wide-ranging importance to human well-being, peace, democracy, access to justice, the protection of human rights and generally, to sustainable development. Special thanks to Justice Winston Anderson of the Caribbean Court of Justice and to the OAS team for making this historic event a reality. My colleagues of the OAS: Jeannelle Van Glaanenweygel, Cletus Springer and

Claudia De Windt.

The rule of law is the binding element within and between these respective domains. And in my humble view it represents the only effective way of achieving equity, and the necessary balance that can assure environmental sustainability and human well-being.

I have referenced human well-being several times in past speech, because ultimately, our efforts toward sustainable development, security, environmental sustainability and political stability, will be meaningless if they do not significantly improve the quality of life of our people.

This is THE core, overarching purpose that drives all democratically-elected leaders and Governments around the world. I always say that governments and politician should serve the 3 P's: People, Peace and Prosperity.

As we all know, there are many, sometimes differing perceptions of the Rule of Law. However there are a few common elements we can all agree on and included among these is respecting and implementing environmental laws and conventions to guarantee the right to healthy environment that the citizens of the Americas and the world are entitled to.

Ensuring all these elements come together and become a reality is the responsibility of each one of us in this room: legislators and parliamentarians, judges, attorney generals, prosecutors and ultimately we the people. We need a whole of society approach

to address the challenges we face, which means also involving the civil society and the private sector.

I am extremely pleased to note the significant progress that has been made by our partners as well as at the national level, since I first addressed a similar gathering on the same subject during the Rio + 20 Summit in Brazil nearly 3 years ago. Since that time we have witnessed an encouraging surge of interest among members of the Executive, the Legislature and the Judiciary branches of Government across the world.

Equally encouraging is the growth of jurisprudence in the subject. I take this opportunity to commend all national, regional and global partners in this critical enterprise for the successes achieved and for the progress made thus far.

But there is a great deal more work to be done.

I believe we need a fresh conceptual sustainable development framework, one focused on the human and environmental potential, in our countries, to guide our future efforts in this critical endeavour. I crave your indulgence as I share with you the elements of such a framework that engaged my mind as I thought through this address.

We would all be familiar with the notion of "*government of the people, by the people, for the people*" espoused by President Lincoln in his famous Gettysburg address in November 1863. To me this is a potent reminder that the "tree of government" consists of more than the 3 branches that I referenced earlier i.e

the Executive, Legislature and Judiciary. These branches of Government are not of their own making and do not exist for their own sake.

The people are the very embodiment of the tree of Government. And I regard the Rule of Law as the trunk which holds that tree together, under pinned by an inclusive governance approach, focused on consultation with all stakeholders, accountability and transparency.

The tree of Government will, in the words of President Lincoln, "*perish from the earth*" if the natural environment from which it derives its sustenance, is in any way compromised or polluted; if its executive, legislature and judiciary branches act in a manner that ignores the will of the people and does not protect and advance the people's well-being.

The challenge before us is to how to devise a system of democratic and environmental governance that is the embodiment of the *Tree of Government* that I have just described.

It is my hope that this gathering will carefully and respectfully consider the evidence, facts, and opinions that are shared over the next 2 days and commit, not only to invest in designing and adopting necessary, appropriate and effective policies, laws and regulations to protect the well-being of the people and their environment, but also to strengthen participatory decision-making frameworks that give effect to the *Tree of Government* approach.

At the heart of this approach must be sustained education and communication especially among the users of natural resources, about the laws and procedures that are needed and that are set in place to facilitate effective enforcement and compliance.

As we identify and focus on the emerging trends regarding the environmental rule of law, and on ways of curbing irresponsible use of the environment and natural resources, we must seek to develop a more balanced and Integrated paradigm for sustainable development, one that will balance the needs of the market with the social challenges and the opportunities the environment offers.

Maybe we should consider civic education as a priority within our education systems at all levels to create responsible citizens, also with respect for the environment.

The OAS has had a deep and abiding interest in the discussions that will take place today. As you would know, integral development, human rights, multi-dimensional security and democracy are the 4 main pillars of the OAS and have received considerable attention ever since the formation of our organization. As a consequence, I believe the OAS has a great deal to offer the global community both in terms of the availability of clear and thoughtfully-negotiated instruments like the Inter-American Democratic Charter, the Charter on Social Protection, and the Inter-American Strategy on Public Participation in Decision-making for Sustainable Development, but also in terms of significant lessons learned over more than

50 years of ground-breaking work in environment and sustainable development.

The Americas is currently at a critical juncture in its history characterized by profound changes driven by a motivation to adjust to the current and future challenges. Last year at the OAS General Assembly held in Asuncion, Ministers of the Foreign affairs of OAS member States agreed to a revision of the Organization's policy guidelines on Sustainable Development to ensure complementarity between the Inter-American Program on sustainable development and the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.

The Inter-American Program on Sustainable Development must be part of the change and must be infused with the results of your discussions on the environmental rule of law during the next days. The OAS General Secretariat has sought comments and recommendations from Member States on the objectives and content of this new sustainable development program and I urge all representatives of Member States and civil society who are present here today to take an active part in this consultative process as well as to participate in the next Meeting of Ministers and High Level Authorities on Sustainable Development which will take place in Honduras in October 2015.

As we join in this global journey of fashioning a global framework for the environmental rule of law, we in the OAS will be alert for insights that will help us build on the achievements of the Inter-American Democratic Charter and on the agreed principles and policy framework for the promotion of

public participation in sustainable development decision making, to ensure that laws are representative of the people and are crafted in a manner that assures effective enforcement and compliance; that the role of citizens, women, indigenous people, youth and children is enhanced and supported in the legal frameworks; and that justice is neither blind nor unwilling to tilt the scales to achieve fairness for those that are most vulnerable.