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ADDRESS OF THE OAS SECRETARY GENERAL AT THE INAUGURATION OF THE SIXTH SUMMIT OF THE AMERICAS

*José Miguel Insulza, OAS Secretary General**

April 14, 2012 - Cartagena, Colombia

Your Excellency, the President of the Republic of Colombia

Heads of State and Government of the countries of the Americas

ALLOW me to begin by thanking President Juan Manuel Santos, his government, and the people of Colombia for their warm welcome as hosts of this Sixth Summit of the Americas.

We are enjoying, Mr. President, the hospitality of Colombia and Cartagena, this historic Caribbean port so close to Central America but at the same time firmly a part of South America, symbolizing the meeting of worlds that is our region and perfectly representing the diversity and cultural wealth of its countries.

I would also like to convey to the Heads of State and Government of the Americas the greetings of the organizations that comprise the Joint Summit Working Group. We have come to receive guidance from you on how better to carry out our work over the next three years. We have listened to views expressed by civil society, workers, indigenous peoples, and our young people. This event has been the most well-attended and pluralistic summit in our history.

I would like to commend the President of Colombia on the constructive and positive tone of the Summit's agenda, which matches new circumstances in the region. The countries of Latin America have arrived in Cartagena fortified by their performance in a global crisis in which their economies have displayed unprecedented strength. The crisis did not spare this region, but its indicators only declined in 2009. By 2010, almost all our countries had positive growth rates and many were enjoying strong growth. 2011 was a good year, too, and the results for 2012 are also promising. Sound economic stewardship, increased domestic consumption, and higher commodity prices have imbued South America with new confidence. Coupled with this has been a significant drop in poverty indicators; record-breaking foreign investment figures; the expansion of

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“multi-Latin” enterprises, which bring a new dimension to the integration process; rising employment, and greater stability in the North American markets.

This could be a good decade for the region: one in which President Santos urges us not to be either divided or complacent, but rather to focus objectively and constructively on the obstacles that continue to hinder our progress.

Those obstacles have to do with our lagging infrastructure and scientific and technological development; the poverty that continues to beset many of our countries’ inhabitants, linked to racial and gender discrimination; with the inequality of our incomes, tax systems, and access to public services; with drug trafficking and organized crime, the strength and persistence of which call for a thorough strategy review; and with the devastating impact of global warming, which has led once-sporadic climate-related disasters to become frequent events in our regions.

The basis for our common action is solid. Today, our countries are open to the world in a greater variety of ways. However, much of our trade remains confined to our Hemisphere and its sub-regions. The eight largest economies in Latin America are among the United States’ top 30 trading partners, all with more or less balanced trade figures. They are all also among the principal importers of North American products. Added to that is the rising prominence of North America-to-South foreign direct investment (and investment in the opposite direction is also at record levels); the strong trade in services; and the fact that Canada and Latin America supply most of the strategic and energy products imported by the United States.

However, our economies, which are more closely tied than some believe, are not the only concern. There is also the issue of our people, who emigrate at a higher rate than the rest of the world’s population, particularly within their own region; fifteen percent of the population of North America [is] of Latin or Caribbean origin, and the number of children born in the United States with those backgrounds comprise twenty-five percent of the total.

There is also a question of values. This Hemisphere and Europe are the world’s two democratic regions. No one attending this Summit owes their presence here to anyone but their people, who elected them. Of course, our democracies are not perfect; far from it. But, look at how far this region has come in recent decades! Surely that is reason enough for our countries to continue to work together to meet the commitments to their citizens undertaken when they signed the Inter-American Democratic Charter.

Over the past decade the region’s countries have become more self-sufficient. Therefore, for hemispheric relations to be to the mutual satisfaction of all, we should all share our responsibilities on an equal footing. Our basic documents present us with a dilemma: on one hand, the Charter of the Organization of American States proclaims the inclusion in our

system of all the countries of the Americas; the Inter-American Democratic Charter, on the other hand, a document that represents the greatest political breakthrough in recent decades, enshrines our common commitment to democracy—not only its basis, but also its exercise—with full observance of human rights, including civil, political, and social rights.

Democracy is moving forward in the Americas and the best way to strengthen it is not through external pressure, imposition, or exclusion. The solution to our dilemma between inclusion and democracy lies in dialogue, cooperation, and tolerance.

Within this framework, the reality of a united Americas region is possible; we have undeniable institutional strengths that will assist in achieving our common goals. But the Americas are also made up of regions. That is why hemispheric action is more likely to succeed if it acknowledges the regional realities of North America, Central America, the Caribbean, and South America, as well as the institutions that have arisen to express those realities. The OAS and the inter-American system are not in competition with regional organizations or with any of the forums that have emerged to give voice to our growing desire for integration; on the contrary, it welcomes them.

We should work together in a framework of tolerance and dialogue to realize the prosperity that today is within our reach. The population of the Americas is approaching one billion. Those people hope for a clear message of unity from their leaders gathered here in Cartagena, in order to strengthen our competitiveness and trade; defeat poverty, discrimination, and inequality; protect the human rights of all our citizens; safeguard their security, and make possible the free and democratic society that they demand.

Thank you very much.

Comparative Perspective

