

**Government of the Republic of Panama
Office of the Presidential Advisor**

**REMARKS BY PRESIDENT JUAN CARLOS VARELA R. ON THE OCCASION OF THE 7th
SUMMIT OF HEADS OF STATE OF THE ASSOCIATION OF CARIBBEAN STATES.
HAVANA, CUBA. JUNE 4, 2016.**

I feel tremendously honoured to be here in Havana, on behalf of and representing the people and Government of Panama, at this Seventh Summit of the Association of Caribbean States.

We congratulate the Cuban Government on the convening of this regional meeting and we convey our thanks for all the courtesies received by our official delegation.

I also take this opportunity to extend a personal invitation to the leaders of the region to visit Panama on June 26, for the inauguration of our Interoceanic Canal Expansion Project.

We hope that you would share with us the joy of the Panamanian people and together celebrate the activation of this great work of engineering for the service of the international community and global trade.

The expansion of the Canal will strengthen the conglomerate of maritime, logistical and financial services offered by Panama and coupled with the air connectivity that we maintain with Latin America and the Caribbean, we will be able to continue advancing toward regional integration, by developing our economic relations, sustainable tourism and trade relations with other extra-regional blocs and partners.

As a country, we are convinced that it is our duty to protect our logistical and financial services platform in order to prevent it from being used for illegal activities.

During the 23 months of our Administration, we made important changes that resulted in our removal from the grey list of the Financial Action Task Force at the beginning of this year.

In addition, we launched bilateral negotiations for agreements on the automatic exchange of tax information with Japan and other member countries of the OECD, thereby reaffirming our commitment to financial transparency.

In the midst of so many common problems that affect our region and the world, which call for collaboration among all countries in order to be in a position to tackle them, we must not lose sight of the fact that relations among States are essential.

Thus, we cannot allow differences in opinion among governments regarding a single issue to compromise bilateral relations, or create tensions between two or more States.

The major challenge facing our region is organised crime and insecurity, which thrive on inequality, poverty and the lack of opportunities for the more vulnerable sectors of our

population.

Drug trafficking creates an illegal economy that defies the authority of governments and also competes with the State for the loyalty of its people and the public servants responsible for compliance with the law.

To claim victory in this battle, we must work on two fronts.

Within our countries, we must increase the State's presence in the most vulnerable zones. This means: develop works of public infrastructure to guarantee universal access to potable water, basic sanitation, decent housing, education, health and transport.

This public investment must be made with transparency, while creating opportunities so that the socially at-risk youth could use their own hands to build their future, instead of destroying one another.

In the international arena, we must continue to work toward strengthening mechanisms for the exchange of security information and intensify efforts to dismantle drug production and distribution systems.

At the same time, all government officials must be the first to set an example of integrity, fulfilling our obligations with efficiency and transparency, being accountable and showing our loyalty to the State in every action and decision that we take.

Panama expresses its solidarity with the sister Republic of Venezuela and hopes that the different political forces in that country could arrive at a peaceful solution through dialogue, which would ensure respect for human rights and democratic constitutional order.

We also ratify our support for the peace process in Colombia, as well as our willingness to intensify patrols in our territorial waters in the Caribbean, so as to contribute to regional security, which will in turn allow the promotion of tourism and trade development, as an alternative to crime, capable of creating well remunerated employment for citizens, resulting in prosperity and stability for our peoples.

In this regard, Panama believes in strengthening connectivity as the foundation for developing a Regional Sustainable Tourism Strategy of the Caribbean, focused on the new markets opening up in Asia and Europe.

I cannot let this opportunity pass without appealing to all countries represented here, for us to maintain open channels of communication, in the quest for alternatives to handle irregular migratory flows, guaranteeing above all, respectable and humane treatment for migrants.

We cannot be indifferent, nor can we turn a blind eye to this reality and other phenomena affecting our continent.

Every year, while global warming and the devastating effects of climate change in the region continue to result in the loss of thousands of human lives, destroyed families and countless economic damages, they also represent the main threat to our sources of food, potable

water and energy.

In light of this reality, Panama is once again ready to place its connectivity at the service of Latin America and the Caribbean by establishing a **Regional Humanitarian Logistics Centre**, which will assemble offices of the United Nations and other specialised international organisations, to provide humanitarian assistance in the event of natural disasters.

Our region is living in a new era, where every nation is responsible for finding its own way, with the emergence of a new political leadership focused on resolving the problems that affect our peoples, committed to transparency and accountability.

That's how we're doing it in Panama, a country in the service of the international community that is committed and ready to cooperate with the region.

We are prepared to be partners and strategic allies, providing our resources to tackle international threats, to build a better future and to continue working together to unite the region and the world, as we have been doing throughout our history.

Thank you very much.