Caribbean Development Stakeholders Highlight Need for Dynamic Post-COVID Plan

MEDIA RELEASE

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There is a need for a Caribbean-focused, multi-pronged economic and social reactivation plan to emerge from the slump triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. Over 100 participating countries, territories and organisations discussed strategies to jumpstart regional air travel, tourism, trade stimuli, share COVID-19 experiences and foster health diplomacy at the First Multi-Stakeholder Task Force Meeting on COVID-19, hosted by the Association of Caribbean States (ACS) on Monday. ACS Members also reported on measures taken to tackle the pandemic and expressed solidarity with countries that have had unequal access to vaccines being used to create immunity among national populations.

In a presentation, the Pan American Health Organisation's Sub-Regional Director for the Eastern Caribbean Dr. Godfrey Xuereb underscored the need to speed-up access to COVID-19 tests, medicines and vaccines, and that was underlined as one of PAHO's 10 key health issues for 2021 and beyond. Dr. Xuereb also stressed the need to build global solidarity for health security and to tackle health inequalities. Executive Director of the Caribbean Public Health Agency Dr. Joy St. John noted that Caribbean Community (CARICOM) prime ministers have been among the leaders in displays of the international solidarity required to tackle COVID-19. "The Chairs of the Conference of Heads of CARICOM and the PM with responsibility for Health in the Quasi Cabinet have demonstrated the principles of equity, regional solidarity and advocacy for the rights of Caribbean people to have access to life saving vaccines."

ACS Secretary General Rodolfo Sabonge notes, "We have all put ourselves in the hands of the scientific community and this in turn is in the middle of a great experiment… it seems that the

advent of vaccines and medical advances offer an opportunity to get out of this quagmire, with the warning that the vaccine will be a solution as long as they are administered equitably."

The meeting also featured presentations from the medical community in Cuba and the research being done to develop, test and roll out its "Soberana 2" COVID-19 vaccine. Cuba is expected to begin testing the vaccine publicly on volunteers in coming weeks. Cuba has pledged its solidarity and willingness to share its vaccines with countries in the region, just as it sent its health care workers on mission in several countries since the beginning of the pandemic.

The International Air Transport Association (IATA) Regional Vice President for the Americas, Peter Cedrá presented on its on-going COVID-19 response and the Travel Pass initiative, which includes systematic testing, biosafety measures, a mobile app and contactless travel. He notes that COPA Airlines, an important connecting airline from Panama is already on board, while discussions with Caribbean Airlines are advanced and will provide safety and comfort for re-energizing air travel, once all governments are on board. He also notes that Virgin Atlantic has expressed interest in participating in the initiative.

Representative of the Chair of the ACS Ministerial Council Carmen Ibarra says that this point between the pandemic and the vaccine is a crucial deciding moment for development. "…These conversations about vaccines, logistics, social mechanisms, and capacity building may not only change lives, but also save them. These conversations can make the journey towards COVID eradication much less costly and traumatic. They can make us more empathetic and efficient than we have been to this day."

Moderator of the meeting, Professor of Practice Winston Dookeran recalls that the ACS COVID-19 Task Force "…was created to address a very specific issue that requires a whole family, whole government, whole society and a whole region approach. To do so, the outcome of this gathering are to get the lay of the land, identify best practice and lessons learnt, map out the gaps and build our capacity to fill those gaps, and in messaging reassure the citizens of the greater Caribbean by instilling confidence in our collective efforts."

About the ACS

Established in 1994, the Association of Caribbean States is an organisation for consultation, cooperation and concerted action in the Greater Caribbean. The organisation's work is focused on: cooperation in the areas of: disaster risk reduction; sustainable tourism; trade, transport & external economic relations; and the protection of the Caribbean Sea. The ACS has 25 Member States, 10 Associate Members 6 Founding Observers and 28 Observer Countries.