ACS develops Port and Maritime Strategy in the Greater Caribbean



The XXII Meeting of the Special Committee on Transport took place at the Secretariat of the Association of Caribbean States on Friday October 25th, 2013. Along with the permanent representatives of the Association and other specially invited guests in the field of transport across the region, the meeting was attended by the Minister of Transport of Trinidad and Tobago, Mr. Stephen Cadiz, who delivered opening remarks.

The Minister noted that although he was new to the portfolio, his previous work in the area of trade exposed him to importance of transport and specifically the issues regarding connectivity within the context of the regional space. The sentiments of the Minister were echoed by the Secretary General of the Association, HE Alfonso Múnera, who additionally pointed out that the theme of connectivity was one of the reasons for the establishment of the Association in the first instance. Given the reliance of the region on tourism and services, connectivity is viewed as important to enhance intraregional trade, as well as to facilitate linkages with the rest of the world.

ACS Transport Director, Mr. George Nicholson, pointed out that the items presented at the meeting and the intended work going forward, were geared at addressing some of these matters. Mr. Nicholson further went on to point out that several studies had been done over time by various regional groups and subgroups and that this was not the time to conduct more studies but to begin implementation of the findings. He urged the committee to give approval to the forming of a working committee that would put specific recommendations on the table for implementation by the Member States.

The report on the work of the Directorate was presented to the committee and focused on the two critical projects currently in progress.

Maps of Maritime Routes of the Greater Caribbean which provides information on all shipping activities within the Caribbean basin was presented. This project is in its third phase with information being updated on a weekly basis. The tool, resident online, is hosted by the Central American Commission for Transport (COCATRAM), and provides a Google Maps based interface. A demonstration of the multi-functional range of the project was done for the Committee by Mr. Jose Dopeso from COCATRAM and Engineer Pedro Súarez from the Ministry of Transport of Cuba.

Registered users of the tool are able to access any port in the region and get information not only on the shipping lines that service each port, but also on the shipping agencies and the types of services provided. The officials from COCATRAM pointed out that the reports which can be generated by the tool, would be a great asset to port authorities and to exporters and importers, as they would be better able to plan their business and see where opportunities in the region can be exploited. The current incarnation of the tool does not include the unscheduled “tramp” lines which service some of the Eastern Caribbean islands nor does it cover liquid transport through the region. These are elements that will be subsequently added provided that there is consensus among Member States for continuance of the tool.

It was noted that COCATRAM does not possess the capacity to market the tool, and Member States were encouraged to disseminate the information to maritime agencies involved in inter-regional trade, port authorities, public and private sector transport experts and Ministries of Trade. It was pointed out that the tool was the only kind of its nature anywhere in the world and was only possible though the work of COCATRAM, the Ministry of Transport of Cuba, and the Maritime Authority of Panama in partnership with the ACS.

The new project, Port and Maritime Strategy of the Greater Caribbean, was presented by Mr. Nicholson who announced that given the importance of port and maritime development to the region as well as the anticipated expansion of the Panama Canal in 2014, it was considered timely to foster, promote and exploit the development of port infrastructure and its logistics in order to make foreign trade of the countries of the region more competitive.

The project would begin with the engagement of a consultant to conduct investigations at the different regional ports and present a diagnostic assessment to the project board, comprising COCATRAM, the Maritime Authority of Panama, and the Ministry of Transport of Cuba. Later at a technical workshop to be held in Cartagena in the middle of 2014, there would be a validation exercise and the presentation of final development document which would then be disseminated to Member States.

In the arena of air transport, a perennial regional problem, the Secretary General under the general theme of connectivity asked Member States to support the establishment of a technical working group which would examine issues of connectivity. Member Countries noted that in the early part of the 20th century there were well developed linkages between the islands and also to the South American mainland. Changes in regional geopolitics have however resulted in an adjustment and realignment of trade routes, and subsequently connectivity throughout the region has suffered. Discussions continued around the issue of air services agreements and the lack of airlift through the region and the high cost of those existing.

In addition, it was noted that while the ACS had traditionally focused on marine and air transport, critical matters in the arena of land transport cannot be ignored. The Director for Transport indicated that the impact of road crashes and the resulting fatalities on the economies of vulnerable States was one area in particular in which the Committee should focus its attention. In that regard the Directorate would begin to examine some of these themes towards the eventual development of a project.

At the conclusion of the Meeting, it was unanimously agreed that the time has come to go beyond rhetoric to produce concrete and realistic action that will bring about connectivity. Moving discussions from the political realm to the technical domain would no doubt allow Member States to advance one step closer to the goal of uniting the Caribbean by air and sea.