

STATEMENT

Dr. THE HON. KEITH ROWLEY

PRIME MINISTER OF THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

CHAIRMAN OF THE CARIBBEAN COMMUNITY (CARICOM)

THIRTY-SECOND INTER-SESSIONAL MEETING

CONFERENCE OF HEADS OF GOVERNMENT OF CARICOM,

24-25 FEBRUARY 2021

- Dr. the Hon. Ralph Gonsalves, Prime Minister of St. Vincent and the Grenadines and Out-going Chairman of the Conference of Heads of Government of the Caribbean Community;
- Your Excellencies, Heads of State and Government of the Caribbean Community;
- Other Heads of Delegation;
- Ambassador Irwin LaRocque, Secretary-General of CARICOM;
- Representatives of Regional and International Institutions;
- Representatives of the Private Sector, Labour and Civil Society;
- Delegates;
- Ladies and Gentlemen.

Good morning and welcome to the opening of the Thirty-Second Inter-Sessional Meeting of the Conference of Heads of Government of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM).

At the outset, I would like to commend the outgoing Chairman, the Honourable Ralph Gonsalves, Prime Minister of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, for his steadfast leadership of the Community at a time when the Region had begun to experience the full brunt of the COVID-19 pandemic.

I also take the opportunity to congratulate Prime Minister Gonsalves on his country's successful Presidency of the UN Security Council in November 2020. As the smallest ever holder of a seat on the UN Security Council, St. Vincent and the Grenadines showed the world that although Small Island Developing States are in fact small we are not insignificant.

Colleague Heads of Government, over the last year, into this year, we continue to be challenged with our various responses to the perilous pandemic that has disrupted every segment of our society while, simultaneously, we have continued to confront more traditional threats to our development such as external economic shocks, the existential threats of climate change and the threatened and actual blacklisting and de-risking of our financial institutions.

This pandemic has highlighted the vulnerabilities of our Community and those of many other Small Island Developing States. To ensure our post pandemic recovery we must continue to call for the broadening of existing economic vulnerability indices that take into consideration the impact that climate change, natural disasters and global pandemics have on our development. This will permit Small Island Developing States access to much needed concessional financing to aid our recovery and build our resilience.

Colleagues, although the early stages of vaccine distribution in our Region have provided renewed hope after a sombre year, the advent of 2021 has been marked by several concerning developments in our Hemisphere including the unprecedented scenes that unfolded at the US Capitol Building; the continuation of the Guyana-Venezuela Border Controversy; disappointment over COVID-19 Vaccine Availability; the designation by the United States of Cuba as a State Sponsor of Terrorism and the deteriorating of the situation in Haiti. Many of these issues will be revisited, in one form or another, over the course of this our Thirty-Second Inter-Sessional Meeting.

Colleagues, when we were gathered in Barbados a year ago, the world had only just begun learning about the seriousness of the novel coronavirus. Shortly thereafter, the Region received its first COVID-19 case and has since been fully engaged in its fight against COVID-19. Across the globe, we have seen how this virus and the measures to slow its spread, most notably shutdowns and travel bans, have impacted all segments of society and completely transformed our way of life.

The Pandemic has precipitated major economic fallout, stagnation and decline, throwing the global economy into a tailspin with very little sign of early recovery. Our Community, although having achieved relative success in our fight against COVID-19, has been identified as one of the region's most vulnerable to the virus especially when the effect that travel bans have had on tourism services in our Region are taken into consideration. This sector is crucial to the survival of many of our Member States and Associate Members. This year, as the Community commemorates the twentieth anniversary of the Revised Treaty of Chaguaramas, which established the CARICOM Single Market and

Economy (CSME), we must continue to advance and strengthen the integration process and harness the CSME to propel our economic recovery and build back better.

Colleagues, the pandemic has also magnified global asymmetries as exemplified by the access to Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) in the early months of the pandemic and more recently through access to vaccines. It is in this context, in my capacity as Chairman of the Conference, I wrote to the Director General of the World Health Organisation (WHO) proposing that a Global Summit be convened as soon as possible, in the context of the WHO Access to COVID-19 Tools Accelerator (ACT-A) Facilitation Council, to address the issues related to equitable access and the distribution of the COVID-19 vaccines.

Consequently, I was invited to participate at a WHO Briefing on COVID-19 last week at which I reiterated our call for the convening of an “international convention of the world’s people’s representatives” to commit to the equitable sharing of available COVID-19 vaccines. I would like to thank the Director General of the WHO and his team for their continued efforts to ensure vaccine availability equity. Today, I also acknowledge and welcome the commitments made by the United States of America, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, France and Germany to the global mechanism, COVAX and to equitable allocation of vaccines. As we meet here now we are all anxiously awaiting our first shipments of the life-saving vaccines from the COVAX experiment.

Colleagues, CARICOM has been invaluable in the fight of our Member States against COVID-19. The evidence of this has been replete over the last year. The continued support provided to the Community by our regional institutions led by the Caribbean Public Health Agency (CARPHA), and the most fervent demonstrations of regional solidarity through the sharing of PPEs (Personal Protective Equipment), reagents and Test Kits and most recently, vaccines, have had significant impacts on our ability to combat the ravages of this nefarious disease.

The generosity of the Governments of Barbados and Dominica in sharing their vaccine gifts, received from the Government of India, is particularly noteworthy and commendable. Prime Minister Mottley your pioneering role in securing the Community's access to vaccines through the African Medical Supplies Platform (AMSP) showed great ingenuity, foresight and stamina. Allow me to also express my sincerest appreciation to the Governments of India and of the African Union for their benevolence and allowing us a pathway to access much needed vaccines to safeguard the health of the people of our Community. We continue to anticipate that our many approaches, requests and orders will soon result in satisfying deliveries of approved vaccines for our anxious populations.

Colleague Heads, on your behalf, I also take this opportunity to express gratitude to all those in the international community who have supported our Community throughout the pandemic. Colleagues, this virus has reminded us of the importance and relevance of regionalism, multilateralism and South-South cooperation in the world today, particularly, during times of crisis.

Colleagues, regrettably, we have witnessed the disproportionate and adverse impact this virus has had on persons with co-morbidities. I recall

that on September 15, 2007, CARICOM Heads of Government met here in Trinidad and Tobago at the First CARICOM Summit on Chronic Non-Communicable Diseases and adopted the *Declaration of Port of Spain: Uniting to Stop the Epidemic of Chronic NCDs*. Today, almost 15 years later, the Region continues to battle with high incidences of mortality due to NCDs. Often, these illnesses develop due to poor quality diets and lack of access to fresh produce. We need to redouble our efforts in addressing NCDs and exploring their nexus with food and nutrition security. It is my hope that our deliberations on Advancing the Regional Agenda on Food and Nutrition Security can assist in this regard while also addressing the Region's significant food import bill.

Colleague Heads of Government, a year ago at our 31st Inter-Sessional Meeting, I committed, as Lead Head with responsibility for Security in the CARICOM Quasi-Cabinet, to hosting a High-Level Summit of Member States and the regional multi-sectoral partners in Trinidad and Tobago in April 2020. Regrettably, due to the events overtaken by the COVID-19 pandemic, we were unable to convene such a Summit.

Although our attention has been appropriately focussed on securing the health and socioeconomic wellbeing of our people and the Community's post COVID recovery, we must remain committed to addressing crime and violence as a public health issue in our Region. Across the globe we have seen how shutdowns have contributed to an increase in cases of domestic violence. Additionally, in the Region, we continue to witness unconscionable acts of violence against the women and children of our Community.

Another issue of great concern to our Community, is the deepening sense of insecurity triggered by the scourge of illicit trafficking in goods and persons in our Region. Such threats to Law Enforcement and Security, specifically the illicit trafficking in persons, have been particularly disconcerting as the Community continues its fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. These illicit activities and their violent spill-over effects further intensify citizen insecurity throughout our Region.

We have acknowledged that to address these challenges, it is insufficient to rely on Law Enforcement alone and that a multi-disciplinary approach which engages various sectors of our Community must be adopted. To this end, it is my hope that we can soon refocus our attention and efforts to convene the Summit with a difference, aiming to adopt a multi-sectoral response to treat with crime and violence as a public health issue in our Region.

Colleagues, globally, the issue of Reparations for Native Genocide and Slavery continues to find a place on our agenda and is gaining momentum. The CARICOM Reparations Commission (CRC) has been at the forefront of this social justice movement and the Region's Ten-Point Action Plan, which links reparatory justice to economic and social development, has been a guiding light to many human rights and social justice groups around the world.

I take this opportunity to applaud the CRC on its pioneering work. Many of us have recognised that the road to reparatory justice is likely to be long and arduous. However, we must stay the course. To this end, Trinidad and Tobago has recommitted itself to assist the Community in this regard and as a first step has appointed Dr. Heather Cateau, Dean of the Faculty

of Humanities and Education of The University of West Indies, St. Augustine, as its new Chairperson to our reconstituted National Committee on Reparations.

Lastly, allow me to express my sincere appreciation to our esteemed Secretary General whose tenure, I understand, will conclude in August of this year. Ambassador LaRocque, I commend you on your unwavering commitment to regional integration. I would like to put on record today that you, with your quintessential cool, calm and steady manner, have served our Community with distinction. Well done.

I would also like to express gratitude to the staff of the Secretariat who work tirelessly to support our Community in every respect and who have displayed exemplary acts of service and commitment throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Without your efforts, the Community would not have done so well in managing this pandemic.

I couldn't end without congratulating the West Indies touring team for the long awaited victory away from home. They surely lifted our spirits again as they underlined the fact that good things happen when we stay in the fight, little but tallawah.

Colleagues, it is my hope that we have a constructive meeting filled with productive exchanges as we deliberate on the crucial issues on the agenda before us.

Let us all remember, **Together We Are Stronger, Together we are louder, never to be ignored never to be insignificant**

Colleagues welcome to virtual Trinidad and Tobago.

This means you all owe us a visit, as soon as we are able to travel freely again, soon.

Thank You