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THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE: BEYOND THE SUMMIT OF THE AMERICAS BY  
AMBASSADOR ALBERT R. RAMDIN ASSISTANT SECRETARY GENERAL,  
COLLOQUIUM "INTER-AMERICAN COOPERATION AT A CROSSROADS"

(April 15, 2009 - Institute of International Relations - The University of the West Indies - St.  
Augustine Campus - Trinidad and Tobago)

**ALBERT R. RAMDIN, ASSISTANT SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE  
ORGANIZATION OF AMERICAN STATES**

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Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am delighted to be back on the St. Augustine Campus after having had the honour of delivering a Distinguished Lecture entitled “A New Moment of Change in the Western Hemisphere: Realities and Opportunities”, on January 26 last.

I am also very appreciative of the invitation to address you today. Thank you for including me into your very full and far-reaching programme of discussions. I commend the organizing bodies, the Institute of International Relations (IIR) of the University of the West Indies (UWI), the Inter-American Studies Centre at Laval University, Quebec, and the Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI) of Waterloo. In addition, I recognize the contributions of FOCAL and the Inter-American Dialogue in having arranged two previous forums on the Summits of the Americas process.

Like any other Summit Process, at every level, governmental and non-governmental, there have been high expectations, tempered by caution, primarily because this year’s Summit comes at a critical time for our hemisphere. It is, indeed, taking place at a time when one might well say that the inter-American system has reached a crossroads. However, it is still as much a time of change as it is a time of great opportunity. Therefore, the focus of this colloquium is most appropriate and timely.

As we all know, the Summits of the Americas bring together the democratically elected Heads of State and Government of the 34 Member States of the Organization of American States (OAS), to discuss and take action on the region’s most pressing political, economic and social issues, with the overarching objective of attending to the needs of the 800 million citizens of the Americas.

The First Summit of the Americas, held in Miami in 1994 on the initiative of President Bill Clinton, began a hemispheric process of cooperation and integration that remains active today. The Summits are critical in identifying parameters and determining guidelines for collective action in the Hemisphere and thereby setting the Inter-American agenda.

The “Spirit of Miami”, the commitment to greater political cooperation to build a more democratic, economically integrated and prosperous Hemisphere, has, however, come under some pressure in recent years. But as the eyes of the Western Hemisphere are now focused on Port of Spain, Trinidad, we believe that the Fifth Summit of the Americas is an opportunity to win over the critics, reenergize people’s faith in the Inter-American instruments, and bolster the spirit of collective action, consensus-building and hope for a new generation. At the Organization of American States, we believe that this periodic gathering of heads provides an invaluable opportunity for the deepening and broadening of dialogue and cooperation among the governments and peoples of the Americas. Following the meeting of Heads of State and

Government, the OAS is generally charged with Summit follow up. We remain committed to working with Member States to fulfill the mandates that will emerge from this hemispheric meeting being celebrated here in Trinidad and Tobago.

Obviously, this is a very exciting week for Trinidad and Tobago, the smallest country ever to host a Summit of the Americas. And this Summit comes at a unique moment for the Hemisphere.

I say “unique”, primarily for the following reasons:

1) It is the first time that a Caribbean nation is hosting the Summit. This presents a unique opportunity for Caribbean Community (CARICOM) leaders to draw attention to their specific challenges and needs, especially with regard to the global financial crisis; climate change and natural disasters; organized crime, the trade in illegal drugs, illegal trafficking in arms, the issue of criminal deportees and increasing levels of violence and crime. All of these phenomena are already having a disproportionate and devastating impact on the small, vulnerable societies of the sub-region and, if things continue unabated, the situation will only get worse.

2) It is also the first time that leaders elected since 2005 will have an opportunity to participate in a Summit of the Americas. Following a series of elections in the last four years and democratic changes in government, only a handful of leaders who were present at the Mar del Plata Summit in 2005 remain in office today.

3) In the last few years, we have been bearing witness to ideological shifts and simmering socio-political tensions in Latin America, especially in the Andean sub-region. These ideological shifts are bringing to the fore a number of divergent views on development and inter-state relations. Even the dynamics of integration in CARICOM and Central America have been affected. And there is the increasing call for Cuba to be fully reintegrated into the hemispheric family of nations. Given the nature of the political changes since the Mar del Plata Summit, I believe that this Summit presents a unique opportunity for leaders and citizens, like those of us assembled here today, to discuss a broad range of issues, face to face, including differences in approach, while at the same time focusing on all that we have in common rather than that which divides us.

4) Attending this Summit will be the new US President Barack Obama following his historic election win last November. His engagement will be closely watched as citizens of the United States and the other 33 nations of the Americas attempt to gauge the new direction of US foreign policy towards Latin America and the Caribbean.

So, while this is indeed a time of change, it is also a time of opportunity.

2008 will be remembered by history as a watershed year. It was the year when several crises came to a head to unleash a period of great uncertainty: the financial crisis, the credit crisis and the economic crisis; and a major spike in the price of food and oil prices. Many of these problems have not gone away; they have merely receded as a result of the global economic downturn. They confront us still.

This Fifth Summit of the Americas has the potential to be another watershed, as all of the above factors and more will influence, in varying degrees, the tone of the political dialogue and the final outcome of the Summit. This moment could well symbolize the end of one era and the beginning of a new one, as our leaders recognize the urgency of finding appropriate, collective responses to the impact of these crises. To do otherwise might well place the Western Hemisphere in danger of succumbing to a further crisis: a governance and security crisis.

The Government of Trinidad and Tobago has quite correctly stressed that the Summit should be people-centred and results-oriented, a position strongly supported by civil society across the hemisphere. In this respect, the integrity and credibility of the process will depend to a large extent on what is decided with regard to issues of coordination, implementation, financing, institutionalization and regularization. Thus, whatever the decisions, whatever the pronouncements, we look forward to a revitalization of the inter-American system and of genuine cooperation as the bedrock of hemispheric integration and development.

The Declaration of Commitment of Port of Spain speaks very clearly about strengthening inter-American cooperation.

Enhanced cooperation at practically every level, and in each sector, is the recurring theme of the document.

The OAS, as the premier hemispheric forum for political dialogue and consensus building, and based on its four pillars – democratic governance, human rights, multidimensional security and sustainable development – is ideally positioned to act as the lead institution, working with the other institutions of the Joint Summit Working Group (JSWG), in support of the social and economic aspirations of our member states and towards a strengthened and more united hemisphere.

I submit therefore that the OAS needs to be more than just the institutional memory of the Summits of the Americas process. Indeed, my recommendation is that the Summits should be institutionalized and incorporated into the existing dialogue architecture of the OAS, with the General Assembly being transformed into a Summit of the Americas four years. This would allow for seamless policy making, which would facilitate coordination, financing and implementation.

In this context, it would be useful to have back-to-back meetings of the OAS General Assembly and the annual meeting of the Inter-American Development Bank, with a mandatory joint meeting of hemispheric Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Ministers of Finance, so as to translate political mandates into budgeted objectives in national programming and the work plans of the hemispheric and regional financial institutions.

In this regard, I welcome the call in the Declaration for Ministers of Finance to meet in 2010, to address regional financial and economic issues and to “continue to explore ways to ensure that international financial institutions, regional development banks and other international bodies take due account of the Summit mandates in their lending policies and technical assistance programmes for the Hemisphere”.

This Summit, I believe, will among other things, address perhaps in detail the economic crisis and possible areas for cooperation. This is of utmost importance. However, as a way of advancing the discourse post-Summit, I would like to put forward for your consideration some additional areas that, I believe, could be impacted by the decisions taken by Heads and that should constitute important areas of focus:

1. Structural peace building: Over the last few years, the hemisphere has experienced significant levels of tension and, on occasion, conflict. There is a need to foster friendlier relations between countries and sub-regions through structural peace building efforts and functional cooperation. All efforts should be made to mitigate sources of conflict and tension and to reinforce peace.

Indeed, we may want to again consider the designation of the Western Hemisphere as a Zone of Peace. Peace, I believe, is a fundamental requisite for development.

2. Hemispheric security: The Western Hemisphere is confronting a range of traditional and non-traditional security threats, many of which are cross-border in nature and some which threaten the ability of governments to govern. In this context, some analysts are taking a new look at how countries can better engage in creating the conditions for stability and security through the design and enforcement of a hemispheric-wide strategic and comprehensive security arrangement that also incorporates social and economic development.

3. Next-generation measures to strengthen and deepen democracy: Democracy has created valuable space for public-private dialogue and greater inclusion, particularly of traditionally marginalized groups. At the same time it has not fully delivered on the expectations of the people of the Hemisphere, particularly those living in young democracies. It is time to begin talking about moving towards a new model of democratic governance with the objective being to have democracy function better, and to ensure more efficient delivery of social and economic goods and services. In this regard, it will be important to focus on the modernization of politics and political parties, with the aim of achieving more efficient and effective democratic institutions; improving transparency; enhancing the ability of parliaments to provide for the voice of the people to be heard more clearly, and to exercise the necessary checks and balances in open, democratic systems. The use of new technologies to promote greater citizen participation is an important element of new generation measures. The deepening and strengthening of our democracies is essential if we are to maintain and build on the gains achieved, particularly in the last few decades.

4. Building and strengthening partnerships for shared responsibility: Modern governance, with increased political attention being paid to transparency and accountability, requires executive and legislative authorities to become more receptive to input from civil society. Structured and meaningful mechanisms for dialogue on issues of public policy, with the participation of civil society, the private sector and trade unions can contribute to informed, effective policy making by governments. In the same vein, I believe that the business community also has a responsibility to be accountable and transparent. Corporate Social Responsibility should be the rule not the exception.

5. Real Integral development: A new approach to development, particularly in our Hemisphere, that is characterized by asymmetries is fundamental for the peace and prosperity in our 34-nation grouping. We need a new approach that is truly multilateral and transformative in nature, and which is not only focused on trade and related arrangements, but also takes into account the vulnerabilities of countries; special and differential elements intrinsic to some countries or sub-regions; optimizes human potential; and harnesses the benefits of science and technology to penetrate a larger portion of our countries, especially rural and marginalized communities. We need to do more, a lot more, to combat extreme poverty, to fight against discrimination and social exclusion, and to fulfil the promise of providing more opportunities for all.

6. Education for peace and development: We know that there are unacceptable levels of poverty and inequality in our hemisphere. If not addressed adequately, these will remain an important source of instability and insecurity. Studies have shown that there is a correlation that links crime and violence to poverty and the lack of economic and educational opportunities. Therefore, it is of critical importance that Governments not only address the symptoms of poverty, violence and crime, but seek to analyze and address the underlying, structural causes of these problems and move to deliver on social policy objectives, especially in education.

7. Youth: In many of our countries, youth represent the majority of the population. They are today's work force and tomorrow's leaders. Yet, there is a disturbing trend emerging of disaffected youth who operate outside the mainstream of the development paradigm and, sometimes, outside the law. Young people often feel frustrated, excluded and marginalized, because, in many cases, even with an education, they cannot find employment or opportunities for entrepreneurship are stymied. If this situation continues, the inter-generational transmission of poverty will remain a dismal reality for many young people and challenges for peace and stability will grow. In this regard, I believe strongly that governments and business should pay special attention to the situation of youth in their countries, providing more cultural exchanges across the Americas, strengthening programs for language instruction, providing job training, educating youth to enter the marketplace, and providing mentoring and internship programs, among other initiatives.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

The Fifth Summit of the Americas and its Declaration are a step toward building a stronger community of nations in the Americas. But even as we move forward on the basis of this consensus, we know that much more remains to be done and that great political and economic challenges remain. We will all need to respond with vision and determination. However, all the political will and determination will only succeed if the necessary sources are committed in order to achieve real results.

The Western Hemisphere needs to respond more strategically and collectively to the current global dynamics of crisis, competition and opportunity. We need to build synergies. We need sustained and meaningful collaboration, on the basis of mutual respect and understanding, shared values and benefits.

In all of the above, the role of the OAS will continue to be critical. We are committed to playing our part beyond the Fifth Summit of the Americas. We now look to our leaders to seize the moment. The OAS stands ready to work with our partner institutions of the Joint Summit Working Group, as we adapt our work programmes to implement the mandates of our leaders to provide the peoples of the Hemisphere with concrete deliverables.

Once again, I wish to congratulate the government and people of Trinidad & Tobago for hosting this Summit and we look forward to a successful outcome.

Thank you for your attention.