



Office of
the Prime Minister

Remarks at The Opening Ceremony of the 44th Regular Meeting of CARICOM Heads of Government

Hon. Philip E. Davis, KC, MP
Prime Minister
The Commonwealth of The Bahamas

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Introduction

Your Excellencies:

Fellow Heads of Government:

Honoured and Distinguished Guests from within and beyond the Caribbean Region:

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Welcome to the Islands of The Bahamas!

And welcome to the 44th Regular Meeting of the Heads of Government of the Caribbean Community.

You visit us as we embark on celebrations for our 50th Anniversary of Independence.

During these 50 years, we have steadily created every major institution in our country, defining ourselves not merely as being 'independent of others', but as free people, determined to pursue our own path to fulfilment.

But even as we embarked on this road to self-determination, we knew that we could not go it alone.

As our Founding Father, Sir Lynden Pindling proclaimed on our accession to membership of The United Nations, "we wish to enjoy the friendship and benefit from the association, wisdom and experience of those who wish to be our friends and respect our freedom as we want and know it."

So it was that we also joined this regional family of nations.

In this joint celebration of the 50th Anniversary of our Independence, and the 50th Anniversary of the founding of CARICOM, in a very real way there is a deep understanding and pride to have come this far.

And as it is in The Bahamas, so it is that our region also faces a host of opportunities, and an array of challenges.

We should take great comfort from the fact that our forebears came together fifty years ago, exactly for this purpose: to take full advantage of the opportunities of our time, and to implement solutions to the challenges that confront us.

And the four pillars upon which our relationship stands, has borne fruit, in good times and bad.

Our commitment to 'functional co-operation' has been powerfully expressed in education, health, and culture.

Our co-ordination in foreign policy matters has strengthened and amplified our voice in global affairs, and given us greater influence over the outcome of international debate.

And, as near neighbours, our collaborative efforts to enhance our mutual security, and, for some, to advance economic integration, has united us in common cause to promote national and regional development.

Our shared history, steeped in triumph and struggle, is testament to our resilience and determination.

In the coming days, we will need to draw on that experience as we engage with the many issues on our agenda.

Regional Challenges and Opportunities

Colleagues and friends, I believe we are in vigorous agreement that the crisis in Haiti requires our urgent attention.

The turmoil and suffering there continue to worsen.

As a near neighbour, The Bahamas is under great strain, and many other countries in our region are also heavily impacted.

We will all benefit if Haiti is again a fully-functioning state.

We should *learn* from the failures of past efforts to help, rather than use those disappointments as an excuse for inaction.

I pray that we can agree a series of concrete steps to help move towards a solution for the Haitian people, and the region as a whole.

We have learned that inaction has its own costs and consequences.

Nowhere is that more the case than on the issue of climate change, which threatens to upend lives around the world, and presents an existential threat to so many of us in this region.

Yet, even though we in the CARICOM region are especially vulnerable to the rising sea levels and temperatures, erosion of our coastal communities, and hurricanes which are more frequent and more intense, by working together, we show that we are not powerless.

I have no doubt that in joining our voices last year to present an agreed position at COP27, we helped to influence the shift in position relating to 'Loss and Damage' arising from the impact of climate change.

There is also genius amongst us.

The Bridgetown Initiative, which proposes reforms to the Global Financial Architecture, is a shining example of how this region has much to contribute to solving critical international issues.

Even though it is not the result of climate change, the disastrous earthquake which recently struck the border region between Turkey and Syria, is a reminder of what unforeseen natural events can do.

As of today, over 40,000 people are reported to have died.

Countless others are missing.

We offer our prayers and condolences to all those affected.

Colleagues – Friends:

Other issues also command our attention.

Investment and co-operation in education, infrastructure, food and energy security, will help to support our collective national development.

For all the loss and havoc wrought by the Covid-19 pandemic, it did teach us valuable lessons about what's important, and about what we need to do to save lives and livelihoods.

For example, here in The Bahamas, we have in the past talked about the need to ensure food security.

But since the advent of the pandemic, we recognised that the need to be able to feed ourselves was not just an economic nicety, but a matter of survival.

Some of the other priority issues are more protective.

We should seek to strengthen our collective response to end the smuggling of guns and drugs.

And we must do all that we can to wipe out the misery of human trafficking.

Let us seize the opportunity provided by this meeting, to make concrete progress in each of these areas.

We must remain alive to the possibilities.

Our friends at the AfriExim Bank have allocated \$1.5 billion dollars to invest in the CARICOM Region.

Should remaining CARICOM Members join those of us who have already signed the agreed Memorandum of Understanding, that figure would be doubled to \$3 billion dollars.

I encourage you to sign.

By moving together, we can achieve something which benefits us all.

Building A Stronger Region

Colleagues – Friends:

The newspaper headlines from 50 years ago, bear startling similarities to the ones we see today.

Rising oil prices, skyrocketing inflation, fractious civil society, and seemingly intractable wars, appear not to have gone away.

Most of these events are not of our making, but they impact the lives of people in the region in a very significant way.

But one thing is certain: whether the issues are old or new, in order to make lasting progress, we must address and promote our narrow national self-interests firmly within the framework of the interests of us all.

None of us will be safe until we are all safe.

None of us will develop sustainably or securely, if we leave our neighbours behind.

None of us will truly prosper if our resources are forever taxed by the poverty and instability of those nearby.

Going it alone will not work.

This is not to say that while we continue to strengthen and build our region, we should dilute or abandon the founding principle of our nation states, namely the right to self-determination.

And when that principle is tested, we must stand firm.

This is true, whether it is border disputes such as the long-standing issue between Guyana and Venezuela, Belize and Guatemala, or as it concerns the internal democracy in our associated states of Bermuda, The Turks and Caicos Islands and The British Virgin Islands.

Further afield, we also re-affirm our support for the people of Ukraine, whose sovereignty is being threatened by the Russian invasion of their territory.

As neighbours, we should continue to embrace each other, and know that we will all succeed if we hold fast the threads that bind us together.

Call To Action

Colleagues – Friends:

The 50th Anniversary of CARICOM presents us with a golden opportunity.

In celebrating the institutions and achievements of these five decades, the many peoples of our region should look back and rightly feel a sense of pride in all that has been gained, and the value added to the region.

But it also presents an occasion to look forward, to seize the opportunity to collaborate, to co-operate, and, through our collective effort, build a stronger, more resilient, and more prosperous region.

The University of The West Indies is a shining testament to the difference CARICOM has made to the lives of the people of the region.

Let us build the equivalent in other areas of life.

While our work here over the next few days will be all-consuming, I hope you find just enough time to experience our islands, our people and our culture.

And if not on this visit, then certainly the next.

Whatever the reason, whatever the time, you are, most welcome.

I pray every success upon our deliberations, and hereby declare this 44th Regular Meeting of the Heads of Government of the Caribbean Community, 'Open'.

Thank you.

END