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Distinguished Chairmen and delegates

I come to this historic summit today not only as President of my country, but as the voice of 500 million inhabitants of this planet who live in Latin America and the Caribbean.

During this year, Colombia, as Pro-Tempore Secretariat of the Group of Rio, of which 18 Latin American States are members, and there is one representative for the 15 nations of the Caribbean Community, has encouraged serious and dispassionate reflection on the future of the United Nations and on the position of our region regarding the new challenges we face with the advent of the Third Millennium.

This is the moment for the people of the Americas to speak to the world from the islands of the Caribbean and the vast continent south of the Rio Grande; the heirs of Atahualpa and Moctezuma, the guardians of the jungles of the Amazon and

Yucatan, the peaks of the Andes and ice-bound Patagonia; the peoples of the continent of the seven colors, as German Arciniegas, that great champion of the Americas, has called us.

And this is what we say:

We believe in democracy and in growth with equity

We aspire to be, above all, a region of peace and friendship.

We value the protection of human rights and of the environment, since both are ways of defending man.

We reject all forms of intolerance, including xenophobia, racism and any form of discrimination.

We exalt solidarity and cooperation as the value which should guide us in the 21st century.

And we therefore declare:

The United Nations is the most important world organization, and it is the duty of the peoples who form it to strengthen and

increase its capacity to respond to the challenges and needs of mankind.

We defend a multilateralism which works on the principles of shared responsibility, of equality before the law, of transparency and of the democratization of international relations and which always acts within the framework of the United Nations as the prime regulator of world order.

By the same token we consider that any international action taken outside the legal framework of the Organization's Charter is unacceptable. And we support the initiative to reform the Security Council and correct the imbalances of its present membership, improve its decision-making mechanisms and bring greater transparency to the management of its business.

We must also strengthen the existing multilateral institutions, building schemes of cooperation between them and the various regional institutions and moving towards a more democratic and participatory international system.

And, linked to the strengthening of the United Nations, we believe it essential to fortify the Organs in the System which are

engaged in the promotion and pursuit of the social agenda, such as development, population, health, education, refugees and children, amongst others

There can be no reform which will be to the detriment of the social agenda of mankind, that is, of support for the countries and population groups which are most vulnerable and most in need.

Distinguished Chairmen:

We in Latin America and the Caribbean have a decisive commitment to democracy and the respect for human rights as the guiding principles of the new international order.

The Presidents of the Group of Rio have signed a Commitment to Democracy in Cartagena, Colombia, reasserting our decision to strengthen it as a system of government, to promote its values as a way of life and to defend the institutional principles of democracy and the State of Law in our countries.

This same commitment was reaffirmed at the Warsaw World Forum on Democracy, in which the international community took up the challenge to become a Community of Democracies.

And less than a week ago we, the leaders of the South American countries met in Brasilia, at the invitation of the visionary and statesman President Fernando Henrique Cardoso, and we decided to direct our efforts towards the creation of an integration zone, founded on those same democratic ideals.

The world today is gravitating more than ever before towards democracy, We have a duty to lend it our support, and to make it grow ever stronger and deeper roots.

We also agreed on the urgent need to encourage the protection of human rights with a comprehensive approach which would embrace civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights. Indeed, if we make no progress in the field of economic and social rights, civil and political freedoms will cease to have any meaning.

With the authority to which we are entitled as the first major region of the world to be free of nuclear weapons, Latin America and the Caribbean strives to create a world free of the nuclear threat and of other weapons of mass destruction. We also expect the best possible results of the International Conference on Small Arms and Light Weapons to be held next year; and we condemn the use of excessively cruel and inhumane weapons, especially those of an improvised or “home-made” type, which should be banned from any kind of conflict.

We in Colombia and the Group of Rio invite all countries to ratify the Ottawa Convention, in order to eliminate anti-personnel mines for ever; and the Additional Protocol to the Convention on Children’s Rights on the Engagement of Minors in Armed Conflict.

As a priority and a matter of urgency, war must be avoided; but where conflict already exists, we must at least observe the rules of International Humanitarian Law. Colombia firmly believes in its postulates, and I am proud to be able to say that today there is no-one under age serving in our Armed Forces.

And in order to secure a firmer future for the generations to come, we must also show courage and determination in facing the world problem of unlawful drugs and related crimes such as money-laundering, the traffic and diversion of precursors, contraband and arms-dealing.

The Group of Rio is convinced that this is a problem for all, and that it must be solved by all in a global effort which should be based on the principle of shared responsibility.

The people of Colombia have suffered more than any other from drug-trafficking, and have paid for it with the lives of their finest men and women and with appalling consequences for the economy and for the environment - the price of this international crime has been far too high. So, we have called on the world to join in a common struggle to rid us all of the scourge of drugs: and our call is now finding a response.

Distinguished Chairmen

It is our duty to foster the conditions for the globalization process of the last ten years to be controlled and fair in human terms.

Today, technology has brought us not only instant transactions but also instant communications. Any abuse, even in the remotest corner of this planet, can be seen, denounced and corrected by the pressures of civil society. And civil society no longer means a few political or ideological pressure groups but all of us, the entire human race.

In this globalized world, trade and finance cannot afford to lose sight of man and his needs. In Latin America and the Caribbean there are more than 200 million poor who hope to share the benefits of progress, and we cannot leave them behind.

What we seek is growth with social equity.

For this, we need international cooperation to finance the networks of social protection and the investment in human capital and infrastructure.

We need to increase the flow of international trade, and put an end to the protectionist measures of the wealthier and more developed countries.

We need a just and lasting solution to the problem of foreign debt in poor economies.

In sum, we need a new architecture for the international financial system which will help to secure stability in financial and exchange markets, and provide assistance and support for countries which are in difficulties or undergoing a process of adjustment.

We thus support the United Nations High-Level Meeting on the major issue of development financing, to be held next year.

The challenge of history is to secure and maintain peace between nations, protect the environment in which we live and our children will inherit, and overcome poverty. The objective proposed by Secretary General Kofi Annan, to try to reduce the number of people living in extreme poverty by half by the year 2015, is no more than the very least we should achieve to make us worthy of the future.

Distinguished Chairmen and representatives of the Nations of the world

I come from Colombia, and I bring with me the will and the valor of 40 million Colombians, human beings who struggle for life, and dream of peace.

I come from Colombia, a beautiful and green country where, unfortunately and illogically, confrontation continues, fed by a few violent men and by the tainted money of the traffic in drugs which affects and involves the whole world.

But we are committed to the quest for a negotiated peace. We are possessed by a desire to achieve greater social justice for Colombians most in need. We are determined to combat drug-trafficking and to fight for human rights. We have been living in a democracy for over 180 years, and we will continue to do so, because the spirit of freedom and tolerance is with us.

The people of Colombia stands firm, striving to build the road to the future. I bring you the message from my country, and from that wider nation which is all Latin America and the Caribbean.

We are the future. We are the promise. We are a land of hope and friendship.

Drawing on the spirit of the fallen heroes of our struggle, suffering the anguish of our poor, trusting in the talents of our people, we strive –as our Nobel Laureate Gabriel García Márquez has put it - for a second opportunity on this earth, and I have no doubt that we shall obtain it.

Thank you very much