REMARKS BY OAS SECRETARY GENERAL,
ALBERT R. RAMDIN, AT THE FORTY-FIRST SESSION OF THE
ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR LATIN AMERICA
AND THE CARIBBEAN (ECLAC)

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(Check against delivery)

Distinguished Minister of Foreign Affairs of Uruguay, Mario Lubetkin, serving as pro tempore Chair of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC),
Distinguished Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the region,
Executive Secretary of ECLAC, José Manuel Salazar,
President Michelle Bachelet,
President Iván Duque,
Keith Nurse, member of the ECLAC Commission on Geopolitics,
Authorities of the Government of the Dominican Republic, our host,
Colleagues and friends,

Let me begin by thanking the Government of the Dominican Republic and the city of Santiago de los Caballeros for hosting us today, and, of course, ECLAC for inviting the Organization of American States to comment on this report on how our region can thrive in the new geopolitical era. ECLAC has always been at the forefront of economic thinking, and this report shows once again its capacity to think in new ways and to bring fresh ideas to our leadership.

I am sure that it took courage to raise these fundamental issues. The Americas need a vision for the future, one rooted in the aspirations and needs of our peoples, which come down to peace and prosperity, and one that responds to global developments over which we have little control. Our footprint as a region is small, and it must grow.

In the 1950s and 1960s ECLAC helped define how the region would find its place in the post-war order. The world today is very different from the post-war world, and even from the world of five years ago. Yet our region needs the same determination to prepare for the challenges ahead, and this report is an important step in that direction.

The report describes a series of ruptures that are changing the global order: supply chains are being securitized; competition has become multipolar and sometimes bipolar; polarization and disinformation are rising while multilateralism is met with suspicion. These ruptures find Latin America and the Caribbean in a difficult position. Growth has averaged just over 1 percent a year over the past decade. Inequality remains high, and our institutions often lack the capacity to carry out structural reform. Recent global shocks add to this pressure: the **situation in the Middle East** and the volatility of oil prices are already affecting social and political stability in countries of our region.

At the same time, I am an optimist by nature, and I welcome the attention the report gives to the **opportunities before the region**. Latin America and the Caribbean have the resources this new world requires: we export more food than we import, and that surplus continues to grow; we hold close to half of the world's lithium reserves, more than a third of its copper and nearly a quarter of its rare earths. We also have highly competitive productive clusters, from food production to aerospace.

But as the report rightly argues, these assets will not by themselves create prosperity. Making use of our advantages requires political will and capable states, so I welcome the specific recommendations the report makes in that sense.

Our assets also carry more weight when we act as one region. This begins with intra-regional trade. In every forum I attend, I point out that **intra-regional trade** accounts for only 14 percent of our exports, borrowing from ECLAC's estimates. Other regions reach 60 or 70 percent, and we rank among the lowest in the world. We need to reduce the barriers to trade among ourselves. This is not only about tariffs, but also about customs procedures, infrastructure, among others.

Trading more also requires getting to know each other better, because we remain **disconnected as a region**. Too often, we still look to Madrid, London or Lisbon when we decide where to study or where to visit. We need to depart from that mindset and look at our own region, because stronger ties between our people and between our institutions are the only way of building trust.

Greater regional connectivity requires both digital and system-wide efforts. It means facilitating investment and banking, and removing trade impediments, which are not always formal barriers and also appear as limits on sea and air routes. It also means increasing people-to-people connections through tourism and educational exchange.

We have the advantage that no fundamental tensions push our countries apart. In a world marked by conflict, Latin America and the Caribbean have not seen a war between states in decades. Connectivity efforts could therefore also rest on peace as a regional asset. And while maintaining peace is indispensable, we ought to act firmly when principles are breached.

Ladies and gentlemen, peace should mean more than the absence of conflict; it should serve as the basis for integration. The shape of that integration will also evolve in the coming years, because our political landscape has changed considerably. When I took office last year, the region had 18 elections ahead. Most have now taken place, and a **new political map has emerged.** With these electoral questions settled, governments must now focus on delivering for their citizens.

Yet ruling parties, regardless of affiliation, find it harder than before to be re-elected in our region. This tells us that citizens expect more and are increasingly disillusioned. The report describes a persistent gap between rising expectations and what **states are able to deliver**, and it links this gap to the erosion of democratic legitimacy.

While closing that gap requires sound policy design that transcends electoral cycles, the report is also right that reducing polarization means addressing the material causes behind citizen frustration. This includes income distribution and social protection issues. Because, in the end, this is what our people want: they want an income and a dignified job, and they want to know that their children will have a future. They are not interested in rhetorical battles between leaders. This is why I place **prosperity at the center of the peace and prosperity agenda** that guides our work at the OAS.

In this regard, in addition to the role of the private sector, which I will address later, our prosperity efforts place the inter-American system and its financing institutions at the core. These include the Inter-American Development Bank, the Development Bank of Latin America and the Caribbean, the

Caribbean Development Bank, and the Central American Bank for Economic Integration. We must act as one region to strengthen democratic governance and deliver results for our citizens.
Honorable Ministers, we recently commemorated the 25th anniversary of the Inter-American Democratic Charter. The Charter is best known for establishing that the peoples of the Americas have a right to democracy and that their governments have an obligation to defend it. Less often cited are its provisions on the interdependence between economic well-being and democratic life. We should not forget that democracy and development reinforce each other.

Equally important is **citizens' demand for more security**. The report notes that criminal organizations exercise de facto control over parts of the territory of many countries. Often, we see an imbalance between the power of the state and the capabilities and methods of criminal organizations. Taking this into account, we have offered the technical and legal support of our specialized bodies to help member states strengthen their law enforcement agencies to combat organized crime with full respect for human rights.

Organized crime is transnational in nature, so our response must also cross borders. I am happy to announce that, before the end of this year, Panama will host an OAS inter-ministerial conference that brings together ministers of foreign affairs and ministers of security and justice to address organized crime.

Honorable Ministers, colleagues: there is a key precondition for the states of the region to act on any of these challenges, be it organized crime, low growth or inequality. That **is the need for unity and consensus**. Consensus is possible when we focus on principles, and when those principles are breached, we must speak up. Even in a polarized setting, the member states of the OAS recently agreed on a comprehensive resolution on the situation in Nicaragua. This shows that our region can still be united when it comes to fundamental questions.

And this region does not escape the growing skepticism about multilateralism we see in the world. In this context, our answer cannot be to defend the old system unchanged. This is why I speak of a **Multilateralism 2.0**. In the Western Hemisphere, this means an inter-American system firmly rooted in international law and democratic principles, with full respect for sovereignty, more pragmatic, and more focused on results. It means an OAS that acts with greater effectiveness and expands practical cooperation.

In this same regard, among the ten propositions of ECLAC's Commission, I want to highlight the call to prioritize functional cooperation over the creation of new institutions. The function of political coordination is at the core of the OAS. It is the political forum where countries build common positions on strategic issues. The OAS was the first organization to adopt a convention on violence against women, and its convention against corruption preceded that of the United Nations. More recently, our Hemisphere spoke with one voice in a Joint Declaration calling for the renewal of the Gang Suppression Force in Haiti. That declaration was conveyed to the United Nations Security Council, which later renewed the mandate.

Dear colleagues: institutions such as ECLAC and the OAS share a role. We offer countries a platform for dialogue, and we stand ready with technical tools and support. Working together, our institutions can build common agendas and synergies to serve our membership.

As both ECLAC and the OAS approach their 80th anniversaries, our first task is to think about the way forward for the region. Member states need to agree on the basics of a common positive, forward-looking, and realistic agenda. An agenda that is inclusive of all nations of the Americas and of all people within them. An agenda that involves every actor with a **'whole-of-society'** approach, or as I usually say, a 'whole-of-the-Americas' approach.

This **includes the private sector**. Their participation is not corporate social responsibility or philanthropy, but an investment for our region to thrive.

Ladies and gentlemen, in my view this report can contribute meaningfully to defining this vision for the Americas and to shaping a well-crafted, well-directed process of transformation. This is why the recommendations of the document, from long-term sector strategies to regional integration and the fight against organized crime, should bring everyone to the same table. We will not agree on everything, but we can cooperate to do better. The OAS is ready to do its part, and I am confident that ECLAC is as well.

May I suggest that ECLAC, in collaboration with the inter-American system and the member states, engage in an intensive multi-stakeholder outreach to share the outcomes of this report. It is in this spirit that I would like to invite you, José Manuel, as Executive Secretary of ECLAC, to present this report to the Permanent Council.

Thank you.