

REMARKS BY HON EAMON COURTENAY, MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS, FOREIGN TRADE AND IMMIGRATION OF BELIZE AND CHAIRMAN OF THE COUNCIL FOR FOREIGN AND COMMUNITY RELATIONS TO THE CARICOM-US VIRTUAL ROUNDTABLE, 21 APRIL 2021

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Mr. Secretary, on behalf of the Caribbean Community, please accept congratulations on your appointment as Secretary of State in the Biden-Harris Administration.

The Community values highly its long-standing relationship with the United States of America, and we welcome this opportunity to have an exchange of views so early in your tenure.

The Caribbean Community and the United States of America are neighbours in the Americas, born of a similar history and committed to certain foundational values that nurture our relations. Today, we welcome your citizens as tourists and residents and our families and friends have long travelled to the United States of America beckoned by the promise of

opportunity and the warm welcome of Lady Liberty to people “yearning to breathe free”. Our peoples bind us together and call us to work diligently to deliver a better and more secure future

The economic challenges we face, the climate risks that threaten us and the multiple vulnerabilities we experience presents a complex and unforgiving international environment.

Therefore, Mr. Secretary, CARICOM welcomed President Biden’s intention to “repair our alliances and engage with the world once again”. We draw comfort from his pledge to “be a strong and trusted partner for peace, progress, and security”.

Our Community, a united bloc of 15 members states and 5 associate members, is excited by the opportunity to renew and reshape our alliance with the United States of America. And most importantly, as a Community to engage and work constructively with the United States of America on the many issues that require our collective attention.

The world we knew has been dramatically disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Today we chose not to meet in person to reduce health risks and because of the challenges of international travel. No country has escaped the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic or the climate crisis which pre-dated it.

Mr. Secretary, of the 20 countries with the steepest economic downturn in the world in 2020, 8 are CARICOM Member States. Today, high indebtedness, exacerbated by the pandemic has left some CARICOM Member states debt-to-GDP over 100%, including Belize at 135%, Barbados at 148% and Suriname at 134%.

Our economic recovery from the pandemic will only begin in earnest when we have access to adequate vaccines. Justice, equity and the health of our people demand that we get access now.

Additionally, we face a financing gap of about \$4 billion to support our recovery. As Middle-Income Countries we have little access to development financing owing to the use of GDP per capita as the principal criterion for access to concessional financing. This is wrong.

We will continue to resolutely advocate for the elaboration of a multi-dimensional vulnerability index to finally give effect to the special case of small island developing states in the international financial system. This

new index is absolutely required to enable small island developing states and countries with low lying coastal regions to weather the devastating effects of the pandemic and climate change.

As we reset the CARICOM-USA partnership, CARICOM renews its commitment to our democratic traditions, respect for the rule of law, including international law, and the peaceful settlement of disputes. Recent events demonstrate that elections cannot be taken for granted. Together we must work to strengthen democratic institutions which guarantee free and fair elections in all our countries.

Two of our member states are engaged in cases before the International Court of Justice. Valuable resources are being diverted on resolving centuries old disputes. These cases are necessary in order to preserve our territorial integrity and to exercise sovereignty over our land and seas and resources. The ability of our members to sustainably harness natural resources within internationally recognized boundaries is critical as we seek economic development and diversification as well as energy security.

We welcome the continued commitment of your Government to these processes.

Mr. Secretary, colleagues, the transshipment of drugs through the Caribbean continues to be a threat to our institutions. We witness increasing flows of drug planes and boats, more militarized smugglers, and the corrosive effect of corruption on our institutions and societies associated with the narco-trafficking. We have an enduring duty to fight narco-trafficking. We expect to deepen our partnership and remain unwaveringly committed to defeating this menace.

We believe that immigration should feature prominently on our agenda. The welfare of our citizens as they move and reside is of paramount importance. Legal and humane treatment is our north star. Caribbean people move north seeking opportunity and want a clear path to legal status. Similarly, Americans travel south to invest and reside, and we offer clear regimes for regularity. There is an urgent need to collaborate to build systems that are workable and transparent so that we reduce the threat of illegal migration.

Urgent action must be taken at the upcoming COP26. We therefore welcome the United States' renewed international engagement and leadership to address climate change and disaster resilience, including the recent initiative for economic cooperation with small island developing

states. CARICOM would welcome an engagement with the US Special Presidential Envoy for Climate Change to address the region's concerns and challenges on these issues.

Earlier this week in your address to the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, you said: "... the Biden-Harris administration will do more than any in history to meet our climate crisis". We welcome that pledge. But Mr. Secretary, you spoke for us all when you declared: "Our future depends on the choices we make today". We agree.

Mr. Secretary of State, CARICOM and the United States are neighbours. We have shared interest for a region and hemisphere where democracy thrives, human rights are respected and rule of law prevails. We also have shared interests in peace and friendly relations among all our countries. And so we welcome your commitment to review, at the earliest, the U.S. policy towards Cuba with a view to resuming the policy of détente.

This Roundtable affords us the opportunity to exchange our views on ways to enhance our relations. It offers us an opportunity to explore an institutional framework which can deliver more tangible results for our mutual benefit.

I thank you

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