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NATIONAL STATEMENT

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Mr. President, Colleague Heads Of State & Government, Mr. Secretary General, Distinguished ladies and gentlemen,

I wish, at the outset, to extend heartiest congratulations on your election to the presidency of the Sixty-Ninth Session of the General Assembly. Antigua and Barbuda looks forward to your leadership and guidance throughout this session.

I also offer congratulations to your predecessor, His Excellency Ambassador Dr. John Ashe, on a job well done and for his unrelenting service to the UN community particularly small island developing states.

Mr. President,

I stand before you as perhaps the newest Head of Government at this 69th session of the United Nations General Assembly.

The political party that I have the honour to lead was democratically and overwhelmingly elected as the government of Antigua and Barbuda just three months ago.

I am probably also among the youngest of the Heads of Government at this distinguished gathering.

But though I may be relatively young and my government new, I have been a steadfast believer in the worth of the United Nations from the moment of my adult consciousness.

The idea that there could be a world without a machinery for leaders to gather in one place, with the single purpose of improving the lives of all mankind, conjures images of chaos, of carnage, and of catastrophe; too frightening to contemplate.

And, while some may argue that the United Nations has not always lived up to its noble purposes, and chaos, carnage and catastrophe have scarred our one planet, I am profoundly aware that without the United Nations these vicious wounds would have been significantly worse.

But even as I rejoice in the existence of the United Nations, I also lament that its largest and most powerful nations have too often used their privileged positions to weaken the authority of the organisation in advancement of their own narrow interests.

It has also been a grave sadness that powerful states have also, in the past, circumvented this body in pursuit of their national goals even in defiance of the solidarity of the larger family of nations.

For these reasons, my government and the people of Antigua and Barbuda strongly support reform of this organisation.

We would like to see reform that democratizes the United Nations to give a greater voice to those countries such as mine that are marginalised in decision making because we are considered too small to make a difference.

We would also welcome comprehensive reform in the UN Security Council that ends the anachronism of vetoes by five permanent members – a system that has no legitimacy in fairness and in global balance; and a system that has often paralyzed the Security Council from acting in a manner that would command worldwide support and acclamation.

Mr. President, it is paradoxical that for these nations, particularly those that most fiercely advocate respect for democracy and the rule of law – to implement these principles at home but decline to implement them abroad.

Respect for the rule of law and for the democratic principle that gives nations rights that are as inalienable as the rights of the individual in powerful states, must become integral to the process and systems of governance by which the world's affairs are managed.

Indeed, Mr President, small states, such as mine, rely on the strength of the United Nations and on international respect for democracy and the rule of law to protect us from incursions on our sovereignty and disregard for our rights.

Centuries ago the philosopher Aristotle spoke a compelling truth when he said of the state:

"A state is not a mere society, having a common place, established for the prevention of mutual crime and for the sake of exchange...Political society exists for the sake of noble actions, and not of mere companionship."

Aristotle's observation of the state remains valid and legitimate in today's international system of states that the United Nations represents.

And every state within that international system must recognize that among the purposes of its political society is “noble action”.

In this regard, Mr. President, I draw this assembly’s attention to the fact that it has been 10 long years since my small country – with a population of less than one hundred thousand – secured a favourable decision by the Dispute Settlement Body of the World Trade Organization in a complaint against the United States, of several hundred million inhabitants.

Despite that favourable judgment and, even in the face of losing appeals against it, the United States government has not seen it as a “noble action” to settle with my small state in a manner consistent with the harm done to our economy.

My country has been denied income which - had we continued to earn - would have contributed significantly to the welfare of my people, and to the capacity of our economy to cope with the grave effects of Climate Change and the financial crisis to which we became a casualty.

I stress, Mr. President, that when my country took the United States before the WTO's Dispute Settlement Body, we did so not as an act of hostility to a neighbor with whom we enjoyed a long and friendly relationship; we did so because we had a duty of care to our people.

My small state was the victim of a trade violation.

In good faith, we sought relief within the international system and the democratic principles and rule of law that it is meant to uphold.

To be fair, the system delivered justice.

But, in doing so, its weakness was exposed when justice could not be enforced because the powerful party whom it found against would not settle with the small country that it injured.

However, Mr. President, if democracy and the rule of law are to prevail in our international system, they have to be upheld and respected by the powerful as much as they are imposed upon the weak, or, indeed, it will foster resentment, discontent and possibly conflict.

Yesterday, speaking in this very forum, the distinguished President of the United States, Barack Obama, said that “...right makes might – that bigger nations should not be able to bully smaller ones.” If this universal truth is a guiding principle of his Government, then the United States cannot continue to approbate and reprobate on this principle.

The noble thing is for the United States to settle this long outstanding judgment fairly and expeditiously.

In another context but similar principle, President Obama said a year ago the following:

“The principle of sovereignty is at the center of our international order. But sovereignty cannot be an excuse for the international community to turn a blind eye”.

President Obama is perfectly right.

And that is why I believe he will agree that sovereignty and power should not be a shield against the fulfilment of obligations independently assessed or an excuse for not settling this very vexing issue.

Mr. President:

I am sure that President Obama would also agree, that the international community cannot turn a blind eye to the blockade imposed on Cuba.

Antigua and Barbuda supports the preservation of the sovereignty of every nation. We are very proud of our long-standing relationship with the Republic of Cuba.

We therefore join with the international community and condemn any discriminatory and retaliatory policies and practices, which serve to prevent Cuba from exercising its right to freely participate in the affairs of the hemisphere.

My government firmly believes that any application of unilateral and extraterritorial coercive laws and measures, that conflict with International Law and the principles of free navigation and international trade is wrong.

We therefore urge our long-standing friend, the United States, to respect and take note of the numerous calls by the United Nations to immediately bring and end to the unjust economic, commercial and financial blockade imposed on our neighbour Cuba.

Mr President, my small country has no military might, no economic clout.

All that we have is membership of the international system as our shield, and our voice in this body as our sword.

That is why we will continue to uphold the value of this United Nations vigorously and why we will join the effort for its reform to make it the guardian of all nations and all peoples.

Mr President,

I want to express my government's full agreement with your decision to make the theme of this General Assembly debate, 'Delivering on and Implementing a Transformative Post-2015 Development Agenda.'

It is well known now that the Millennium Development Goals Taskforce has reported mixed progress in the achievement of key targets.

Among the targets on which there has been insufficient acceleration has been Official Development Assistance.

I congratulate those countries who have reached the pledged target of 0.7% Official Development Assistance to Gross National Income.

However, Mr. President, the developed world is still not meeting the target of US\$315 billion. Indeed, it is not even fulfilling half that amount.

My own country, and the CARICOM region as a whole have witnessed a decline in bilateral assistance from larger and richer nations within our own hemisphere, and we have relied on non-traditional sources such as the People's Republic of China and the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela.

On the issue of energy, the high costs of which cripple our country, the Venezuelan Petro Caribe arrangement has been a life belt in a sea of turbulence.

We acknowledge with gratitude too the contributions of our other international partners to include the European Union.

However, as we go forward, Mr. President, there is clearly a need for more global engagement on development assistance with representatives at the table not only of donors but recipients.

Beyond all this – and as a most urgent matter – the international financial institutions must be urged to stop penalizing small states in the Caribbean on the basis of their flawed per capita income criterion.

Our countries are denied access to concessional financing because we are classified as middle-income countries.

This obdurate attitude of the International Financial Institutions, in not devising better criteria for assessing the eligibility of our small economies for concessionary financing, forces us into the commercial market.

The consequence of this is that our debt is rising and many of us are among the most highly indebted countries in the world on a per capita basis.

But, what is the alternative?

Mr President,

It is said that “six years after the global economy collapsed, jobs are being created, global financial systems have stabilized and people are once again being lifted out of poverty”, but this is not a universal truth.

In the case of small states in the Caribbean, the global economic crisis in 2008 in whose creation we played no part, sent our economies into a tailspin.

We are yet to recover fully from its impact, and we will probably never recover the development-ground that we lost.

Remarkably, a significant number of our educated young people are unemployed.

If we fail to satisfy their aspirations, we condemn them to a life on the margins of society at best, or a life of crime and violence at worst.

No nation can opt for so devastating an alternative.

There is now an urgent need for this United Nations body, through one of its appropriate organs, to address the large debt that has been accumulated by CARICOM countries that have experienced declining aid; poor terms of trade; the imposition of high costs for regulation of financial services; and the costs of curbing drug trafficking and stopping refugees.

Those countries in the Caribbean – including my own – that are now increasing their debt, are not doing so because of poor policies, or because we are not focussed on increased productivity and growth; nor are we doing so because of high expenditure on vanity projects or unsustainable ventures. We are doing so to build the socio-economic infrastructure to facilitate revenue generation.

The fact of the matter is that the global crisis that began in 2008 has set our economies back to pre-1974 levels. While we are tightening our belts, forging relations with the private sector, and energetically seeking foreign direct investment in productive enterprises, we are scraping our way uphill having been pushed downwards by a deluge of external factors.

The United Nations Organisation cannot step back from these realities, and it would be wrong – as it has been wrong for some time – for it to abdicate its responsibility for action to multilateral organisations whose membership is made up only of a few, however powerful they may be.

Indeed, it is precisely because the members of these groups are powerful, and they reach into a network of economic and political decision-making bodies that can easily impose their will on the weak and vulnerable, that the United Nations organisation should not abandon its responsibilities to the weak who depend on it.

Mr. President,

I could not leave this podium without addressing the war on terror and the issue of the dreaded disease Ebola.

The threat of Ebola requires a global response and we urge the international community to act swiftly and decisively in combatting what could become a global pandemic with grave socio-economic consequences for small states; especially our fragile tourism dependent countries in the Caribbean.

Antigua & Barbuda condemns the savage and cruel acts of the Jihadists of the Islamic State who beheaded three civilians.

On behalf of the government and people of Antigua and Barbuda, I express deepest sympathy to the families of the victims and to the people of the United States and the United Kingdom.

There can be no justification for such barbaric behaviour.

We cannot afford a world that slips back into the dark ages when violence, wars and barbarism were the stock-in-trade of religious intolerance and ethnic divisions.

Yet, as we survey the global scene there are deeply troubling instances of such behaviour in Europe, in Africa, and in the Middle-East.

In all this, the role of the United Nations becomes critically important – what is required is not unilateral acts that will embroil specific nations in cycles of violent retaliations; what is required is a United Nations whose member states, particularly those on the Security Council, to act together to defend peace and security.

Mr. President,

Only one hundred days in Office, my government has demonstrated its commitment to building an all- inclusive, all empowering, egalitarian society, by promoting the protection of women's rights, gender equality and the rights of the disabled.

We see these issues not only as human rights issues, but as essential components of sustainable development, peace, social justice and security.

At our first session of Parliament, my government ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. We have gone further and have appointed a distinguished son of the soil who is visually challenged, to serve as our distinguished Ambassador to the United Nations.

We have also appointed a plethora of women to serve in the Upper House of Parliament, as ambassadors and in other key positions within the public sector.

It is my government's pledge to continue to work towards full gender equality and the advancement and empowerment of women.

Mr President,

When you were elected to superintend the affairs of this 69th General Assembly, you remarked that “to say we are living in tumultuous times would seem an understatement”.

You noted that the entire world is facing challenges such as poverty and hunger, climate change and rising sea levels, persistent unemployment, armed conflicts and Ebola.

You called on this global body to tackle these challenges “with dedication, single-mindedness of purpose and compromise,” and “a sense of resolve and resilience.”

You were right to do so.

Crisis is staring human civilization in the face and, whether it is climate change, the Ebola virus or the threat posed by the Islamic State, we all face a future where these challenges can only be dealt with by joint international action.

The United Nations, the Parliament of Parliaments, is the place where this joint action is to be decided and implemented.

We need to strengthen the UN's capacity for such action, whether military or humanitarian.

Antigua and Barbuda commends the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela for its pledge of five million dollars towards the Ebola eradication budget and the Republic of Cuba for sending 156 doctors. We call on members of the international community to contribute towards the effort.

Mr. President, there is no substitute for the United Nations.

Antigua and Barbuda pledges its continued support and participation in the work of the United Nations.

Thank you.