

**CELEBRATION OF THE 60TH ANNIVERSARY
OF THE OAS CHARTER (1948 - 2008)**

BY

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PRIME MINISTER OF ST. VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES**



**Speech Delivered on the Occasion of the 60th Anniversary
Commemoration of the OAS at Peace Memorial Hall,
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**Office of the Prime Minister
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[FORMAL GREETINGS]

On April 30th this year, the Organisation of American States (OAS) celebrated 60 years of the signing of the OAS Charter in Bogotá, Colombia, in 1948. Today, here in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, we acknowledge and celebrate this historic achievement which is a seminal manifestation of the vision of Pan-Americanism of our America, propagated through the ages, though with different emphases, by iconic leaders such as Thomas Jefferson of the United States of America, Simon Bolivar of Venezuela, José Martí of Cuba, and Eric Williams of Trinidad and Tobago.

The OAS was founded in a world vastly different than that of our own today. The Second World War had ended a mere three years before the signing of the OAS Charter. The Cold War, which was to rage in the latter part of the twentieth century for almost fifty years, and which has shaped considerably the functioning of the OAS, was

then in its embryonic stages. In 1948, everywhere, the faces of men and women were strained and anxious. The first two articles of the OAS Charter reflected some of the core and enduring considerations for collective action, namely, to:-

- i. Achieve an order of peace and justice, to promote solidarity and cooperation, and to defend the sovereignty and territorial integrity of member states;
- ii. Strengthen the peace and security of the Americas;
- iii. Promote and consolidate representative democracy;
- iv. Promote, by cooperative action, economic, social and cultural development; and
- v. Eradicate extreme poverty, which is itself an obstacle to full democratic development of the peoples.

Over the past six decades, the OAS has chalked up impressive achievements through shared objectives, shared responsibilities, and firm commitments particularly as a standard-bearer for peace and good governance, an honest broker in the settlement of political disputes, a promoter and protector of human rights, and a

facilitator or contributor to social development. At the same time, the work of the OAS has periodically been undermined and its nobility distorted by the quest for hegemony in Our America by those who have ascribed to themselves unilaterally a false notion of their “manifest destiny” to rule Our America as they see fit. The disregard of people's right to self-determination, their territorial integrity, and their right to pursue public policies of their choice are exemplified in the overthrow of the reformist Arbenz government in Guatemala in 1953, the coup d'état in Chile and the assassination of its duly elected leader, Salvador Allende in 1973, and the on-going terrorist assaults against the Cuban government and people since 1960.

To be sure, the maturation of democracies in Our America, the altered geo-political landscape, the liberating forces of globalisation and the revolution in information technology, and the enhanced political space gained through laborious struggle by historically oppressed peoples, have all conjoined to reconfigure the praxis of the OAS in accordance with its central foundation values.

The OAS is a relatively small organisation numerically but it contains within it some of the most powerful and influential countries in the world, for example, the USA, Canada, Brazil, and Mexico. Formally, each nation, even its smallest, St. Kitts and Nevis, has the same entitlement and an equal say, in the organisation. That, of course, is the formality. The substance is different. Accordingly, the OAS, as a force for good in this hemisphere, depends substantially on the directions and resource allocations of the larger and more economically-endowed nations. At the same time smaller nations do have influence if their conduct and diplomacy are honest, principled, and collectively effective in the furtherance of the central purposes of the OAS.

St. Vincent and the Grenadines became a member of the OAS in 1981. Since then, we have been an active participant in the work of the OAS, and in our own small way, have helped it to grow. Our small size has not inhibited us from speaking with our own voice. The fundamental precepts and values of the OAS are a noise in our blood, an echo in our bones.

We in St. Vincent and the Grenadines have benefitted immensely from the OAS in matters touching upon education, health, agriculture, social development, good governance, the maintenance of law and order, security, and regional cooperation. Since 2001, a total of 55 Vincentians have benefitted from OAS Fellowship programmes in education and training. Several small projects, grounded in sustainable economic development, cultural empowerment, and environmental enhancement have been facilitated and funded through the Special Multilateral Fund of the Inter-American Council for Integral Development (FEMCIDI). The Youth Assistance Project, executed by Marion House, has been able to make a difference for the better to the lives of young Vincentians. Similarly, a teacher education programme in Information Communication Technology has been quite useful to us.

Through the collaborative efforts of the OAS and other member-states, St. Vincent and the Grenadines have been a beneficiary and contributor to the Inter-American Drug Abuse Control Commission (CICAD), the Inter-American Commission Against Terrorism (CICTE), and the Inter-American Commission on Ports (CIP).

The OAS, too, has been a vital monitor of our election process and has repeatedly reported it to be sound, free, and fair. Its imprimatur rightly accords legitimacy to our electoral democracy. Further, the OAS has provided opportunities for the training of election officials.

Moreover, the spawning of a number of specialised agencies and entities throughout the Inter-American System, of which the OAS is at the core, have contributed immensely to the improvement of the quality of our people's lives. Two of these specialised organs, the Pan-American Health Organisation (PAHO) and the Inter-American Institute on Agriculture (IICA) are acknowledged here for special mention because of their exceptional good works.

Regionally, the OAS has been a critical collaborator with the University of the West Indies (UWI) which, too, celebrates its 60th anniversary this year. It has also assisted the Caribbean Regional Negotiating Machinery (CRNM) through the OAS-UWI Trade Officials Seminars and the Masters' level programme in Trade Policy and Negotiations, from which Vincentian students have benefitted.

Currently, the OAS is playing an important role as the institutional conduit for financial assistance from the Austrian government which was negotiated earlier this year by the Prime Minister of St. Vincent and the Grenadines.

So, the OAS has been off-times a force for good. At the same time, some members have sought to misuse and abuse their power and strength in the inter-American system to the detriment of the collective. This is a standing danger against which we must all battle so as to ensure that the whole emerges as more than a summation of its individual or even dominant parts.

Where now does the OAS go from here?

First, it must mend the fractured family of Our Americas by ensuring the return of Cuba, the heroic land of Maceo, Marti and Fidel, to the OAS. In the not-too-distant future, the OAS is likely to be presented with an opportunity to assist in brokering the normalisation of relations, on a principled basis, between Cuba and the USA.

Secondly, we must fashion an appropriate language and praxis to enable a mutually acceptable and productive conversation and engagement between member-states which have substantial differences with each other. The foundation values and principles regarding the sovereignty and the right to self-determination of nations must be respected. Disputes must be settled by peaceful means. The principle of non-interference in another country's internal affairs is to be recognised in practice. Conspiracies to maim, disfigure, disable or even assassinate political leaders are to be eschewed and vehemently condemned.

In these respects, the reliable reports coming out from Bolivia and Venezuela are profoundly disturbing. No member-state has the right to subvert the democratic processes of another. Assassination plots and political conspiracies against duly-elected leaders are a species of terrorism and barbarism which are an affront to all civilised peoples. Accordingly, all right-thinking nations and peoples are required as a matter of urgency to stand in solidarity with the peoples and governments of Bolivia and Venezuela in their

commendable efforts to deepen popular democracy, uplift their standards of living, strengthen regional integration, and simply to dwell in peace. Hegemonist, and anti-popular elements from ancien regimes in this hemisphere must be allowed no space for their illegitimate activities, which are contrary to the domestic and international law of civilised nations.

Thirdly, the member-states of the OAS ought to elaborate and implement more comprehensive partnerships for solidarity and genuine development. This is particularly important at a time of escalating oil prices and food prices internationally, economic dislocation, and the effects of climate change. This hemisphere possesses abundant personnel, material and institutional resources for us to be doing better than we are doing collectively. Some nations have embraced this approach. Indeed, the Summit of the Americas in Quebec City in 2001, offered some hope and promise in these respects, but sadly they have been dashed. To be sure, efficacious trading arrangements are to be put in place but they cannot be encumbered by unfairness, rigid reciprocity, and a denial of special and differential treatment for small, vulnerable countries.

In any event, trade is but one component of a partnership; a comprehensive multi-faceted package, including meaningful development assistance, is necessary and desirable. Free trade agreements, simpliciter, grounded in the gospel of trade liberalisation between metaphoric elephants and ants are unacceptable!

Fourthly, there ought to be a greater coordinated emphasis on matters concerning transnational crime, drug trafficking, illegal trafficking in persons and small arms, money laundering, and terrorism. I acknowledge that much productive work has been done in these areas but much, much more needs to be done. The terrorist acts of September 11th, 2001 in New York and those aboard the Cubana aircraft off Barbados in October 1976 are standing reminders of the dastardly evil which some persons inflict upon unsuspecting others. We must support unequivocally the American government and people in their legitimate quest for justice against the perpetrators of the horrible crimes of September 11th. Similarly, we join the Cuban and Venezuelan governments and peoples in insisting that the alleged mastermind of the Cubana aircraft

tragedy, Luis Posada Carriles, be brought to justice. No nation in Our America ought to shield him!

Fifthly, the struggle for historical reclamation and cultural authenticity particularly of formerly subject peoples, including the indigenous populations, ought to be brought to the centre stage of the activities and programmes of the OAS. This is an existential issue which touches the spirit and soul of the diverse peoples of America. Its centrality is vital to life, living, and production.

I am sure that these and other proposals will no doubt be explored fully at the next Summit of the Americas, the fifth, scheduled for April 2009 for the first time in a Caribbean country, Trinidad and Tobago. Its central theme is: *“Securing our citizens’ future by promoting human prosperity, energy security, and environmental sustainability”*. The Caribbean Community (CARICOM) is preparing well for this event. The government and people of Trinidad and Tobago will undoubtedly be magnificent hosts.

Here in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, the OAS office headed by Mrs. Melene Glynn has been performing most satisfactorily with slender resources. She is a tribute to the OAS and its ideals. I applaud her and thank her. The splendid work of the OAS Office locally represents a rebuke to those who advocate the closure of "country offices" and their replacement by single regional office. We reject unreservedly this absurd proposition as wholly counter-productive. I am of the view that it would effectively undermine the OAS in its delivery of services to its member-states. It may even be politically fatal!

Finally, I express thanks to all the leaders, delegates, and officials of the OAS over the past 60 years who have toiled to uphold and promote the core values of this most treasured hemispheric body. Still, we must strive to do better and to do some things different. The Government and People of St. Vincent and the Grenadines sincerely wish the OAS many, many years of successful hemispheric cooperation.

Thank you!