

**A TIME OF RESPAIR  
BEYOND COVID, ECONOMIC DISLOCATION, CLIMATE  
EMERGENCY, AND GLOBAL TURMOIL: FRESH HOPE FOR  
LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN**

**BY**

**DR. THE HON. RALPH E. GONSALVES  
PRIME MINISTER OF  
ST. VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES**



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**FORMAL GREETINGS**

Madame Chair of the Permanent Council of the OAS, Her Excellency Audrey Marks, Permanent Representative of Jamaica; Secretary General of the OAS, His Excellency Luis Almagro Lemes; Assistant Secretary General, His Excellency Nestor Mendez; Excellencies, Permanent and Alternate Representatives, Permanent Observers, Staff of the Secretariat, Invited Guests.

I thank Your Excellencies for this invitation to have a conversation with you from this esteemed podium. I am very pleased to have a distinguished lady from our Caribbean in the Chair this morning. Like me she is a graduate from our premier regional university, the University of the West Indies;

she hails from Mary Seacole Hall, named after the heroic Jamaican nurse who attended the sick in the Crimean War in the 19th century. I, personally, owe Jamaica an immense debt of gratitude for helping to mould me and shape me; it continues to do so.

## **INTRODUCTION**

in March 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the raging COVID-19 pandemic a global health emergency of disastrous proportions. For some eighteen months the global economy was plunged into a veritable tailspin as a consequence of this public health disaster. Practically every economy in the world suffered moderate-to-severe declines. Particularly hard-hit were under-developed and developing economies, inclusive of most in Latin America and the Caribbean, home to 650 million people.

Simultaneously, the ravages of man-made climate change, including hurricanes, storms, landslides, drought, land

degradation, desertification, and biodiversity calamities, were evident in every corner of the globe, including “Our America” — to use José Martí’s telling description — and our hemisphere. My own country, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, additionally suffered 21 volcanic eruptions in April 2021, giving rise to the evacuation and temporary resettlement of 20 percent of the population.

Meanwhile, the contradictions in the global political economy, within and between nations, exacerbated by regional wars and conflicts were laid bare, in all their deleterious fall-out, for the whole of humanity to witness.

Then, on February 24, 2022, Russia launched its so-called “special military operation” in Ukraine, but which 141 of 193 member-states of the United Nations denounced as “military aggression”. The adverse knock-on economic and political turmoil globally was swift, sharp, extremely painful, and continuing to this day. Hundreds of thousands of lives have been lost, and much valuable treasure has been wantonly

dissipated by the active participants in this European theatre of war.

Globally, and certainly in “Our America”, poverty and hunger increased; food insecurity grew exponentially; the entire menu of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) suffered huge setbacks; living standards in most countries have fallen and are falling further; public and private debt grew geometrically as expenditure soared and revenues fell. Everywhere the faces of men and women grew pained and anxious; they still are pained and anxious, today.

Currently, the economies of Latin America and the Caribbean have been struggling to return to pre-pandemic levels. Some have been successful in this regard; some are making limited progress; and others, yet, are in a downward, spiraling descent.

## **LAMENTATIONS AND FRESH HOPE**

Excellencies, you the informed and sophisticated audience at the Permanent Council of the OAS know in detail the catalogue of the recent travails of our people, and understand the proximate and root causes of the debilitating and challenging condition of “Our America” as manifested in our people’s lives, living, and production. So, there is no further need for me to regale you with a diet of lamentations.

Yet, morning by morning, new mercies we see; all that we need His hand has been providing; great is His faithfulness. So, have we been advised by the ancient prophet.

In the midst of all the dislocations, disasters, suffering and setbacks in “Our America”, there is nevertheless a hopefulness and a determination of our populations to turn the setbacks into advances, to avoid a further desecration of our future, to recover, and to rebuild; in short, to RESPAIR; that is, to embrace fresh hope for a recovery and a better condition of life

from the condition of dislocations, disruptions, uncertainties, despondency, and despair. We are not a people defined by lamentations.

This quest to respair, the embrace fresh hope, goes to our existential beings; it encompasses, too, faith and love, the trilogy of which are resident in our people's consciousness as core essences of our Judeo-Christian socialization and the resolute experiences of "Our America", shaped by a social solidarity which emerges from "the genius of our people".

This "genius of our people" flows from a fluid space in our collective consciousness, conditioned by the fever of our history, awash with possibilities beyond the ordinary, the regular, the normal, the usual. It is this existential spirit and yearning from which we must draw, individually and collectively, in our respairing; it is that which encompasses a social individualism and solidarity beyond, and in contrast to, a limiting atomised individualism of an unfettered market economy and a dog-eat-dog survival of the fittest. A society

grounded in naked individualism is unsustainable. At a time of grave challenge, nay, peril, which “Our America” faces today, it is necessary and desirable to foster our people’s instinctive sense of social solidarity, goodness, and good neighborliness in national unity, not ugly divisiveness, craven dishonesty, and partisan self-interest, in quest of an illusory power.

“Our America” has to be re-energised in its pursuit of a deepening of regional integration and internationalist solidarity steeped in multi-lateralism and international law, devoid of the hypocrisy of great powers and their yearning for imperium, hegemony, or a facile “manifest destiny”.

### **REGIONAL SOLIDARITY**

“Our America” possesses regional institutional arrangements of its own creation which must be strengthened and refreshed for the current, trying times. There are several noteworthy ones, including: First, the Caribbean Community (CARICOM),



a fifteen-member bloc of economic integration and functional cooperation, stretching through the archipelago from the Bahamas in the north to Trinidad and Tobago in the south, thence to Belize in Central America, and Guyana and Suriname in South America — a multilingual regional grouping, inclusive of French-speaking Haiti which is hurting very much, and its condition demands urgent repair. Secondly, the Association of Caribbean States (ACS), a 25-member grouping of countries in the Caribbean and Latin America washed by the Caribbean Sea, (El Salvador, a Pacific country is included), and which focusses on functional cooperation in trade, technology, transportation, tourism, and disaster preparedness. Thirdly, the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR) with five full members (Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay — Venezuela, suspended since December 1, 2016), and seven associate members (Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Peru, Suriname). Fourthly, the Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organisation (ACTO) consisting of eight countries (Brazil, Guyana, Suriname, Venezuela, Colombia, Peru, Bolivia, and Ecuador) dedicated to

preserving and enhancing “the lungs of the world” — the Amazon Forest. Fifthly, the Central American Integration System (SICA) which comprises eight countries (Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, Belize, and the Dominican Republic). Sixthly, the Bolivarian Alternative for Latin America (ALBA) which consists of nine member-states (Antigua-Barbuda, Dominica, Grenada, St. Kitts-Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Cuba, Bolivia, and Venezuela). And seventhly, the 33-member Community of States of Latin America and the Caribbean (CELAC) which is the premier political integration mechanism for “Our America”. St. Vincent and the Grenadines currently holds the Pro Tempore Presidency of CELAC.

CELAC, which has an integration focus quite distinct from the mandates of the OAS, and not designed as an alternative to the OAS, possesses enormous potential for good. The member-states of CELAC have a land area of 7.88 million square miles and a population of 650 million; in the aggregate, they have a nominal Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of

approximately US \$5 trillion. Brazil, the largest economy in CELAC and the 12<sup>th</sup> largest globally, has a GDP of US \$1.7 trillion; and Mexico, the second largest economy in CELAC and the 15<sup>th</sup> largest globally, has a GDP of US\$1.3 trillion.

CELAC is an appropriate vehicle to engage the USA on a range of matters touching and concerning the material and political interests of both CELAC and the USA. Similarly, a proposed encounter between CELAC and Canada is advised. CELAC, too, is the preferred mechanism for “Our America” to develop jointers and linkages with the European Union as was demonstrated recently in July 2023 at the EU-CELAC Summit in Brussels. In September 2023, on the margins of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), CELAC has planned interfaces with the African Union and India. CELAC is also pursuing possible engagements with the Association of South East Nations (ASEAN), the BRICS, the People’s Republic of China, the Arab League, and other groupings globally.

“Our America” is also served admirably by regional financial institutions of a developmental kind such as the Caribbean Development Bank (CDB), the borrowing-members of which are from the English-speaking and non-borrowing members such as Canada, United Kingdom, Italy, Germany, China, Venezuela, and Mexico; the Development Bank of Latin America and the Caribbean (CAF) which has 19 members, 17 of which are from the Caribbean and Latin America and two from Europe (Spain and Portugal); and the powerful Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), headquartered here in Washington and led by the USA — the IDB comprises most countries from Latin America and some from the Caribbean along with major developed countries such as USA, Canada, Japan, Italy, Spain, France, the United Kingdom, and the European Union.

Hemispheric linkages of “Our America” and North America (USA and Canada) find institutional expression in the OAS. Unfortunately, for various reasons Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua are absent. Sadly, too, an egregious error was

made last year by the host country, the USA, to exclude Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua from the Summit of the Americas. It is high time that a great power like the USA exorcise its nightmarish ghosts from the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which still populate the minds of too many leaders in Washington. In a world so racked by awesome existential challenges, it is infantile to persist with these exclusionary vanities. Engagements, without pre-conditions and without unilateral sanctions or impositions, are sensible, practical paths for mature leaders of understanding and wisdom to pursue in the interest of peace, security, and prosperity. On this bundle of matters, there is a fierce urgency of now.

### **INTERNATIONALIST SOLIDARITY**

The countries of “Our America” and North America are part and parcel of the network of global institutions including the United Nations (UN) and its specialised agencies, and the international financial institutions of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The UN, the World Bank,

and the IMF are urgently in need of meaningful reform in order to better serve “Our America” and other emerging and developing countries. It is well-near universally accepted that these institutions were fashioned in the immediate post-Second World War period in a world vastly different from the one that exists today. These global institutions must be re-engineered and transformed to serve humanity much better than they currently do. The immediate post-1945 power arrangements have an air of unreality, and more, for today’s urgent tasks. There are numerous reform proposals which have been credibly and persuasively canvassed.

Unless the “ancien regime” is altered, newer, more efficacious parallel structures will be established. Indeed, one discerns more than tentative steps in this regard, already. The bi-polar world in the decades after 1945 is history; the unipolar world of American triumphalism in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union has been giving way to other centres of global economic and political power, even though the USA remains the dominant power in economic and

military terms. One does not have to subscribe to the thesis of the “Thucydides’ Trap” to appreciate that the dialectics of altering dynamics are emerging or have emerged. It may not be conclusively established from history or reason that it is natural and inevitable for violent clashes to occur when a rising power threatens to displace a ruling power, it nevertheless portends potentially dangerous or uncontrollable conflicts or dislocations which may inflict untold and unpredictable damage to much or all of humanity. Mature and wise leadership is required.

Of particular interest for “Our America” and developing countries generally are the issues of financing for development and financing for climate action (adaptation, mitigation, loss and damage). The World Bank and the IMF do not adequately or sufficiently meet the needs of this veritable existential, midnight hour for humanity especially those who are “the wretched of the earth” — to use Franz Fanon’s compelling formulation.

## **WHAT DO WE NEED, NOW?**

What do we need? We need: Far more concessionary finance! Far more creative financial instruments beneficial to developing countries. Far swifter and more efficacious disbursement of financial resources to developing countries! Fulfilment now of the pledges made by developed countries within the framework of the Conference of Parties (COP) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)! Fair trade with rules-based certainty; an end to suffocating unilateral sanctions, and a weaponising of the reserve currency, the American dollar!

The Caribbean Community, CELAC, and the EU-CELAC Summit endorsed the Bridgetown Initiative: 2.0, a bundle of proposals with a progressive thrust, presented to the world by my friend, the Prime Minister of Barbados, Mia Mottley. Some developed countries and even some functionaries of the World Bank and the IMF are giving lip-service to this Initiative while



at the same seeking to rob it of its progressive content and intent, by introducing or inserting metaphoric Trojan Horses. The developing countries are alert to these shenanigans, which will be resisted.

Overwhelming support from developing countries, especially middle-income countries which are highly vulnerable to the extreme distresses of climate change and their consequences, have been gathering for the adoption, through the UN system, of a Multi-dimensional Vulnerability Index (MVI). This, too, is being bogged down, and pulled hither and thither, in a multitude of technicalities by the international financial institutions (IFIs) and their dominant stakeholders. It is a beastly thing that is being done to small, vulnerable countries which the world's major emitters of greenhouse gases have condemned to cycles of natural disasters, hardships and damnation. The bulk of the 8 billion people in the world will resist.

Essentially, developing countries, inclusive of the vulnerable and fragile have three strategic options before them in their interface with the developed world: First, roll-over-and-play-dead; we are not of that school; secondly, accommodation where necessary and desirable in our interest; and thirdly, creative resistance in the interest of our people's humanisation. In making appropriate accommodations we recognise that although the shortest distance between two points, geometrically, is a straight line, a mountain cannot be so climbed; thus, it may be necessary and wise to take some zigs and zags but not to end up in a cul-de-sac, a dead-end; always we must be ascending to the mountain top. Make no mistake, however, we cannot survive and thrive unless we resist creatively, in solidarity with one another.

There is a thesis which is being advanced by some western countries that the struggle in the world today is between democracies and autocracies. St. Vincent and the Grenadines, a strong liberal democracy with a social democratic outlook, rejects this unsound, self-serving, and even hypocritical

thesis. St. Vincent and the Grenadines sees the struggle in this world between the dominant powers as centering upon the control, ownership, and distribution of the world's resources. It has been so from time immemorial; colonialism and imperialism have in fact exacerbated the exploitation of developing countries for the gain of the rulers of the colonial, imperial, and monopoly capitalist centres. The struggle has been, and is, about who gets what, when, and where, how. Civilised life and living now demand fairness, justice, peace, security, and prosperity for all. The world's peace, a desirable security, and sustainable development are unlikely ever to be satisfactorily attained if the strong and powerful continue to do what they can, and the weak and fragile suffer what they must.

Imperial powers and would-be hegemonies all prattle that they are in quest of a New World Order. From the trenches of the periphery, St. Vincent and the Grenadines poses three haunting queries in response: What's New? Which World? And Who Gives the Orders?

Over the remaining few months of 2023, critical global gatherings are ahead: the G77 and China Summit is being convened in Cuba in mid-September. A few days later the United Nations General Assembly will be in full swing. A special convocation on the SDGs is being organised under the UN auspices at the time of UNGA. In October, the World Bank and the IMF hold their annual meetings. In late November-early December, COP28 under the UNFCCC takes place in the United Arab Emirates. “Our America” must be in the vanguard of resetting the agenda at these, and other relevant fora, in humanity’s interest, inclusive of the interest of our own people’s humanisation.

### **REPARATORY JUSTICE AND ABCD COMMISSION**

St. Vincent and the Grenadines is insisting as part of the conversation on the attainment of the SDGs in a timely manner, there must be a special carve out for reparations from European countries for the legacies of underdevelopment

caused by native genocide and the enslavement of African bodies perpetrated by these metropolitan countries in our Caribbean, our Latin America, and our Africa. In this mix an especial focus is required for our Haiti. The case for reparatory justice within the framework of the SDGs is compelling and unanswerably strong.

St. Vincent and the Grenadines has further proposed the establishment of an Africa-Brazil-Caribbean-Diaspora Commission (ABCD Commission). The CARICOM-AU Summit last year endorsed this proposal. This permanent Commission, under wise and committed political leadership, will oversee and implement a host of practical initiatives for enhanced cooperation between the 54 member-countries of the African Union (a population of 1.4 billion); Brazil with a population of 220 million, one-half of whom are of African descent; the Caribbean, consisting of all 25 countries washed by the Caribbean Sea, with a population of some 300 million; and the Diaspora of persons of African descent especially in North America, Europe, and those parts of Latin America not

washed by the Caribbean Sea. This potentially mighty force of some 2 billion people or one-quarter of the world's population will give contemporary meaning to the philosophy and programmes of distinguished Africanist and Caribbean leaders, including the Right Excellent Marcus Mosiah Garvey of Jamaica, who in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in the USA, Canada, the Caribbean, Latin America and elsewhere mobilised the largest mass movement of Black people ever in the diaspora, in the interest of their humanisation.

In this regard, I echo today the call made by CARICOM for His Excellency Joseph Biden, President of the United States of America, our friend, to issue a full and unconditional pardon to exonerate Garvey for the unjust conviction of him on trumped-up charges in the federal courts in the USA in the 1920s. This is a symbolic matter of great importance to the Caribbean, Africa, and the African diaspora. Such an exoneration would be just; it would represent the healing of a painful wound.

## **SUMMATION**

In the quest of “Our America” to respair, to embrace fresh hope, faith, and love, I conclude with the apt words of Octavio Paz, Mexican Nobel Laureate in his poem, Release:

*“Beneath the rain of drums  
The flute’s black stalk  
Grew, withered, and sprouted again.  
Things cast off from their names  
I flowed  
At my body’s edge  
Among the unbounded elements.”*

My dear friends at the OAS: Some sleep to dream; we must dream to change our world, for the better! I commend the national, regional, and global programmatic platform that I sketched today for your favourable consideration.

Thank you!