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CELAC: FAITH, FRESH HOPE, AND LOVE

BY

**DR. THE HON. RALPH E. GONSALVES
PRIME MINISTER OF ST. VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES
(PRO-TEMPORE PRESIDENT OF CELAC)**

**[Address delivered at the VIII Summit of the Heads of State and Government
of the Latin American and Caribbean States, at the Sandals Resorts
Buccament, St. Vincent and the Grenadines,
on Friday, March 1, 2024**

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Excellencies, my dear brothers and sisters of our Latin American and Caribbean civilisations. Your Excellency, my friend, the Secretary General of the United Nations; and Your Excellencies, the Special Representatives of the European Union, the African Union, the ASEAN, the Peoples Republic of China, the Republic of India, and other Special Guests.

On behalf of the government and people of St. Vincent and the Grenadines I welcome each of you to our archipelagic homeland of thirty-two islands, a magnificent component of our Latin American and Caribbean civilisations. Please be assured that it is also your home of faith, fresh hope, love, and solidarity. In our landscape and seascape resides, permanently, the spirit of the indomitable Joseph Chatoyer in the same heroic pantheon alongside Toussaint L'Ouverture, Simon Bolivar, José Marti, Fidel, Chavez, Cheddi Jagan

and other titans, not of mythology, but of lived struggles for our people's humanisation and the integration of what Marti simply called "Our America" — a geographic locale of thirty-three independent countries bound together since 2011 as the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC).

[Excellencies, the amazingly splendid physical facilities which are accommodating us at this Summit are the fruits of coordinated regional initiatives and labours in Our America. Truly, this is a Resort made through the prism of our Latin America and Caribbean civilisations. The Sandals Resorts, a regional and global conglomerate, originate in Jamaica, with headquarters in the Bahamas; they are here by agreement with the government of St. Vincent and the Grenadines. The construction company which built this Resort at Buccament is CODELPA which hails from the Dominican Republic. The workers of all types and professions who laboured joyously and productively are from all over Latin America and the Caribbean, more than one-half of whom are from St. Vincent and the Grenadines; only a sprinkling of the construction personnel is extra-regional. The Sandals Project Manager, Terrence De Vignes,

a master engineer, a veritable artist in the shaping of structures and the management of people, is a Trinidadian. The employees at the Resort itself are from the Caribbean, overwhelmingly from St. Vincent and the Grenadines, the products of our nation's Education Revolution and Sandals' in-house training. It is fitting that this regional entity be the venue for the Summit of the regional enterprise known as CELAC. It is the natural place to be! I thank all who have been engaged in this venture and who toiled to meet our tight deadlines.]

St. Vincent and the Grenadines, your host, holds an especial place in the historiography of Our America. There are several notable historical features of this small but special land. I will refer to some: First, St. Vincent and the Grenadines had the shortest period of the enslavement of African peoples in our hemisphere, 1764 to 1838: Our rugged terrain and the militancy of our indigenous people (the Callinago and the Garifuna) kept European colonialism at bay for over 200 years. Secondly, St. Vincent and the Grenadines had a population of free Africans before enslaved African bodies arrived in 1764. Among these were "runaway slaves" from Barbados and some

who survived a terrible shipwreck; they were embraced by the indigenous Callinago who came to St. Vincent and the Grenadines over 2,000 years earlier from the Orinoco; their offspring formed a distinct nation — the Garifuna. The Garifuna are the only people of African descent in the hemisphere who were never enslaved and never submitted to enslavement. Thirdly, in St. Vincent and the Grenadines the last, and longest continuous struggle, a 31-year guerilla war against European colonialism occurred, from 1764 to 1795; in that latter year our resistance was defeated and our leader, our sole National Hero, Joseph Chatoyer was ambushed and killed. In victory, British colonialism carried out a large scale genocide against the Callinago and Garifuna, isolated some 5,000 of our patriots on the nearby inhospitable island of Balliceaux, populated by lizards and iguanas; within six months, one-half of them died from a lack of food and water, and assorted diseases; the remainder were forcibly transported to the Bay of Honduras on Roatan Island; from there they, and their descendants, established Garifuna communities in Belize, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Honduras. Fourthly, St. Vincent and the Grenadines is thus the spiritual home of all our Garifuna brothers and sisters in our Central American

diaspora. This land known to them as Yurumein is blessed by our ancestors and their struggles; and is watered by their blood, sweat, and tears.

Our inheritances are special! We are, metaphorically, a symphony: We are the songs of the indigenous people (the Callinago of the Orinoco, and the Garifuna); we are the rhythm of Africa; we are the melody of Europe; we are the chords of Asia; and we are the homegrown lyrics of the Caribbean. Like all symphonies, there are from time-to-time dissonances which we address wisely through our formal and informal institutions; but we are, indisputably, an integrated whole. We are part of an island and sea-board civilization; a land of liberty, democracy, and progress, made by our own hands and brains in solidarity with our friends and allies. And we guard our independence and sovereignty jealously. We treasure solidarity.

Our CELAC was formed out of a confluence of predisposing and inducing circumstances. Our nations' common history of European conquest and settlement, the monumental crimes of native genocide and the enslavement of African bodies, the condition of indentured

servitude, the undemocratic, gubernatorial governance arrangements of a rapacious colonialism, the struggles for the reclamation of sovereign independence and popular democracy, our contemporary battles against imperialism and an iniquitous political economy of global monopoly capitalism, our quest for sustainable development and inclusive societies, and our geographic propinquity, have all conspired to predispose us towards creating CELAC. The requisite glue of solidarity of purpose and action in our contemporary times, in pursuit of peace, justice, prosperity, and security for all, based on the popular will, induced us to establish this celebrated regional integration mechanism — CELAC — a community of sovereign states.

[Our varied national differences, including the diverse languages of the colonialists — Spanish, Portuguese, English, French, and Dutch — do not all shake or undermine our profound pre-disposing and inducing commonalities. Indeed, we have made these languages our own with especial cadences, rhythm, flair, and linguistic innovations, shaped by our own experiences. They intermingle, and shift, comfortably in day-to-day discourses with indigenous languages,

creole improvisations, and dialects. We daily go beyond the boundaries of the inherited colonial languages; and so, we make them distinctive and whole.

We gather in St. Vincent and the Grenadines for CELAC's Eight Summit at a time of extraordinary global challenges of great complexity, awash with multiple contradictions. These impact significantly on Our America, and specifically on our people's lives, living, and production. These externally-sourced encumbrances and burdens, which restrict or constrain the scope of action for our people, are made more complicated by our home-grown weaknesses, limitations, confusions, and conflicts, eased enormously by our strengths and possibilities, inclusive of those resident in "the genius of our peoples." Even with our burdensome travails and setbacks, we have advanced commendably, by and large, as ordered societies with thriving civilisations and a material base reasonably supportive of uplifting lives and living.

We in CELAC have a road-map for confronting meaningfully our challenges, encumbrances, burdens, weaknesses and limitations,

and from our inherited and extant conditions we have set forth, accordingly, a package of policies and programmes to advance our peoples' interests. Our Draft Declaration of Kingstown, of nearly 100 paragraphs, which I expect to be adopted unanimously today, contains the necessary and desirable pathway under twelve rubrics:

1. Economic Stability, Food Security, and Social Cohesion.
2. Regional Integration.
3. Health and Sanitation.
4. Education, Humanities, Science, Technology, and Innovation.
5. Energy Transition, ICT, and Space Cooperation.
6. South-South Cooperation and Extra-Regional Relations.
7. Climate Change and Disaster Mitigation.
8. Peace and Security.
9. Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Peoples of African Descent, Indigenous Peoples, and the Process of Decolonisation.
10. Transnational Organised Crime and the World Drug Problem.

11. Reparatory Justice to repair the Legacies of Underdevelopment Caused by Native Genocide and the Enslavement of African Bodies.
12. Gender Equality, Women, Youth, and Persons with Disabilities.

Additionally, there are nine Special Declarations which I expect also to be unanimously adopted today. [These cover an array of subjects, namely: Conservation of Oceans and Their Resources; Migration; the Termination of the Economic, Commercial and Financial Blockade Against Cuba by the USA; the Indigenous Woman's Protection of Traditional Knowledge; Comprehensive Disaster Management; the Fight Against Terrorism; Gender; the Revalorization of Democracy Against Hate Speech; and the Revaluation of the Cocoa Leaf.]

Over the past year since the election of St. Vincent and the Grenadines as the Pro Tempore Presidency of CELAC in January 2023, relevant initiatives were undertaken within each of these broad frameworks. The Honourable Minister of Foreign Affairs of St.

Vincent and the Grenadines, Keisal Melissa Peters reported earlier on these efforts, and the considerable progress made.

Still, it is necessary and desirable to summarise certain highlights of functional cooperation, advocacy, and mature regionalism, including the platform for food security; the push for enhanced air and sea transport; the elaboration of the Health Self-Sufficiency Plan; the proposal for the establishment of the Latin American and Caribbean Centre for the Development of Science, Technology, and Innovation; the joint promotion of an environment for open, secure, stable, accessible, and peaceful information and communications technologies; the coordination of efforts to address the issues of climate change and disaster mitigation, including the promotion of the Climate Adaptation and Comprehensive National Disaster Response Fund (FACRID) of CELAC, and the consideration of the Caribbean Sea as a Special Area in the context of sustainable development; the initiative of St. Vincent and the Grenadines to activate the Technical Working Group on Afro-descendants of CELAC; enhanced activism for Reparatory Justice including the promotion of CARICOM's 10-Point Plan for Reparations; and the

activism in maintaining the Caribbean as a Zone of Peace, including the sterling efforts to reduce tensions on matters consequential to the border controversy between Guyana and Venezuela which resulted in the Argyle Declaration of December 14, 2023.

In the latter regard, CELAC and CARICOM, without any involvement whatsoever from any foreign source, in solidarity with Guyana and Venezuela, convened a dialogue for peace at Argyle, St. Vincent and the Grenadines. This home-grown effort by CELAC and CARICOM had many architects and builders, but St. Vincent and the Grenadines is duty-bound to recognize the extraordinary contributions to this process of peace-building by President Lula of Brazil, President Petro of Colombia, President Diaz-Canel of Cuba, Prime Minister Roosevelt Skeritt of Dominica and the then Chair of CARICOM, and Prime Minister Mia Mottley of Barbados. However, without the wisdom and maturity of two highly-esteemed leaders, my dear friends and brothers, and combatants for peace, President Ali of Guyana and President Maduro of Venezuela, the Pact of Argyle would not have been possible. We thank, too, the tremendous support

provided by a great man of peace, Antonio Guterres, Secretary General of the United Nations.

Over the year of St. Vincent and the Grenadines' Pro Tempore Presidency of CELAC, we have come to understand, more than ever, that although the shortest distance between two points, geometrically, is a straight line, mountains, especially political mountains, cannot be scaled on a straight line. It is necessary, if not always desirable, to take zigs and zags in the ascent of any political mountain while bearing in mind that the goal is to arrive at the mountain top. Thus, the zigs and zags must never restrict us in a cul-de-sac or dead end. So, compromises, in a complex world, are required in our pursuit of peace, prosperity, and security for all.

The understanding of all this is fundamental to life and living in the real world, suffused as it is with contradictions galore which are to be resolved or, at least, muted. Having understood this, we then apply our hearts to wisdom in arriving at a mature judgement. This has been a major lesson of history, including that taught in sacred texts of the Hebrew Bible and the Holy Koran.

Accordingly, it is distressingly painful to witness live on television the intransigence of the government of Israel and its small, and dwindling number of defenders, in the perpetration of genocide against the people of Gaza, and Palestinians generally. In a Draft Declaration we are demanding, among other things, an immediate ceasefire, ample humanitarian assistance, the observance of international law, a peaceful resolution of the conflict, and a two-state solution, as repeatedly endorsed by the United Nations.

Similarly, the terrible ordeal in Ukraine must come to an end with negotiations for peace between Russia, on the one hand, and NATO and Ukraine on the other. There is no other practical or wise conclusion. The continuation of this senseless war has the potential of leading humanity into a nuclear Armageddon.

In our region, our beloved Haiti, the land of L'Ouverture, continues to be in turmoil and conflict. The government lacks popular legitimacy; and it has been ineffective. One alarming statistic is that in January 2024, more Haitians — over 1,200 — were killed than

Ukrainian combatants in the war with Russia. The country is gripped by three crises: the political, the humanitarian, and the security, all at the same time. The United Nations' Security Council has adopted a framework for a resolution; and the Caribbean Community, of which Haiti is a member, is seeking, with the Haitian stakeholders, to fashion an appropriate political and governance path forward. But at the end of the day, this is a matter profoundly for the Haitian people. They are required to make judicious compromises, without compromising their own values, in the interest of the people of Haiti. Perfection must not be made the enemy of a good transitional staging post on the way to peace, security, and a democratic way of life.

[Excellencies, throughout our history, and that of every country in Our America, three political tendencies are evident in responses to colonialism, neo-colonialism, imperialism, monopoly, capitalism, and hegemony: One, a capitulation or roll-over-and-play-dead approach; two, a servile accommodation; and three, an approach of creative resistance, tactical accommodation, and a focused developmental quest in the interest of our people's humanization. The government and people of St. Vincent and the Grenadines affirm that we are in

the trenches of creative resistance to the structures of hegemonic over-rule and in the vanguard of sustainable development for all.]

[In the reclamation of independence and sovereignty, St. Vincent and the Grenadines embraces internationalist solidarity and takes seriously its obligations, and responsibilities in the multi-lateralism of the United Nations. Accordingly, in 2019 St. Vincent and the Grenadines served successfully as the President of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) of the United Nations — the smallest country ever to do so. In the 2020-2021 period, St. Vincent and the Grenadines became the smallest country ever to be elected as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, in which capacity it served with distinction. And in 2023, St. Vincent and the Grenadines assumed the Pro Tempore Presidency of CELAC, the only CARICOM-member-state to do so, thus far.]

Excellencies, permit me to assert certain essentials, matters of imports, from the trenches, the lived experiences, of a small country, St. Vincent and the Grenadines:

We tell everyone, especially those whose very essences prompt them to demand subservience from us, whose instincts drive them towards imperial or hegemonic rule, that this country will never permit any other country to dictate to us; we will never allow anyone to choose for us our friends and allies; we do not put a “For Sale” sign in our metaphoric shop window; and, determinedly, we are not for sale. We are not better than anyone, but no one is better than us. We are small but we have a history of authenticity, of struggle, of achievement; we possess a nobility; we are a special part of the great Latin American and Caribbean civilisations, and we have a trajectory for further ennoblement; we rely on the genius of our peoples in a continued quest for self-mastery, but always in solidarity with like-minded peoples the world over. We are friends of all; and we strive for a different and better world.

Later today, St. Vincent and the Grenadines passes the torch of the PTP of CELAC to the Republic of Honduras and its leader of inestimable value and virtue, President Xiomara Castro. On January 23, 2023 in Buenos Aires, she proclaimed defiantly: “We are the resistance!” I understood fully what she meant. And I am most

pleased to be led by her for the next year in CELAC. It is expected that Honduras will be succeeded by the Republic of Colombia in March 2025. Together, these three countries and CARICOM's Chair constitute the Troika Plus One of our CELAC.

I thank all those who have assisted St. Vincent and the Grenadines over the past 13 months of our leadership of CELAC. The “naysayers” who opined that it was not possible for a small country like St. Vincent and the Grenadines to lead CELAC successfully, have been proven wrong yet again. I make one final place to my colleagues gathered here: Let us over the next year fashion a permanent and nimble Secretariat for CELAC so as to ensure that its monumental tasks, in this challenging global environment, be optimally addressed. As in biology where structures follow functions, we in CELAC are required, after 13 or so years of existence, to create the necessary and desirable structures to execute our essential functions.

As I conclude, the words of the distinguished poet of resistance of Guyana, Martin Carter, ring in my ears:

*“And so
if you see me
looking at your hands
listening when you speak
marching in your ranks
you must know
I do not sleep to dream but dream to change
the world.”*

In CELAC we must not sleep to dream but dream to change the world,
for the better!

Thank you!