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SPEECH BY THE SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE OAS AT THE INAUGURAL SESSION OF THE FOURTH SUMMIT OF THE AMERICAS
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Mr. President of the Argentine Nation, Dr. Nestor Kirchner,
Distinguished Presidents and Prime Ministers,
Distinguished Foreign Ministers and Ministers of State,
Distinguished Ambassadors,
Distinguished Representatives of International Organizations,
Ladies and Gentlemen:

For over a decade the Summit of the Americas has been the foremost event in our Hemisphere. At the five Summits held over the years (Miami, Santiago, and Quebec City, in addition to Santa Cruz and Monterrey), you have adopted decisions that have affected life in the Americas and continue to do so. The Inter-American Democratic Charter, the launching of FTAA negotiations, the Inter-American Convention against Corruption, the Special Rapporteurship for Freedom of Expression, and the formation of the Inter-American Drug Abuse Control Commission are only a few of these achievements.

That is why we make lengthy preparations for these Summits and why they generate so many expectations. In recent months, and up until yesterday, we have spent many hours in discussions among our governments, agencies of the inter-American system, young people, women, original peoples, entrepreneurs, workers, nongovernmental organizations, legislators, and many other groups, in pursuit of agreements that would make this Summit the important event our peoples have a right to expect.

Although the task has been lengthy, your coordinators have succeeded in adopting very important conclusions, included in the text of the Declaration and Plan of Action. Many questions remain, however, on which the voice of our leaders could make a substantive difference. We are certain that you will take this opportunity to put forward the proposals and policies that will guide the affairs of our inter-American community in the coming three years.

This Summit is also being held at a crucial moment. 2004 was the region's best economic year in over two decades, and 2005 and 2006 also have favorable prospects, despite the problems caused by high oil prices. We have democratic governments throughout the Hemisphere and many countries, among them all those that have undergone crises of governance, are preparing to hold democratic elections in the coming months to elect their officials once again.

Still, we feel a palpable sense of uncertainty, which is natural after the crises we faced in the first years of the decade. From the people's point of view, there are two key questions: First, will we be able, this time, to maintain a pace of growth that will prevent our region from continuing to lose standing in the world economy, in the face of other developing regions that, in recent decades, have had much higher rates of growth? And, this time, will the benefits of our growth and our democracy actually benefit the more than 200 million poor, half of them destitute, living in our region today?

The theme chosen for this Summit, which our citizens have identified in numerous surveys as the primary problem of the region, is at the heart of these questions. According to the most recent figures, each year five million people join the labor market in Latin America and the Caribbean. This enormous number stems from high birth rates in recent decades and from the growing and welcome incorporation of women into the workplace. If we already have over 20 million officially unemployed, just maintaining that figure represents an enormous effort. In addition, seven in 10 new jobs are in the informal sector, and many working people earn too little to support their families above the poverty line. Worse yet, the wage gap between unskilled and skilled workers has been increasing and the concentration of wealth in a small group of people is ever more obvious.

Poverty and employment are inextricably linked, but in a much more complex way than we think. There are far more poor than unemployed. Our challenge includes the non-working poor as well as those who work for less than a living wage.

In order for this effort to be successful, certain essential conditions must be met. These are growth, macroeconomic balance, and open markets. We have made important strides with these policies, such as the rates of growth mentioned above, a substantial lowering of deficits and inflation, and the conclusion of a significant number of bilateral and regional trade agreements, including, most recently, the CAFTA-DR.

Preserving these macro-policies is the basis for the specific policies you will adopt in terms of productivity, efficiency, encouragement of small and medium-sized enterprise, access to credit, education, and training, and many others that make up the essence of the Declaration and Plan of Action of Mar del Plata, to increase employment and lessen poverty and inequality.

Other public policies are also necessary to tackle the Hemisphere's social problems. Many of the changes of two decades ago were made for the sound purpose of creating more freedom in the marketplace and promoting private economic initiative. But distorted ideologies occasionally led to a retrenchment and disparagement of public policy and of the role of the state and government in distributing wealth and providing essential social services to the majority of the people of the Americas.

In no way does recognizing the value of public policy signify succumbing to statist temptations that limit the capacity of enterprise and individuals to fully develop their ability to generate wealth. On the contrary, the creation of an economic and social climate conducive to investment and private enterprise through clear rules that eliminate fear, that open up markets, that cut back on bureaucracy as much as possible, and that afford private initiative the opportunity to achieve growth must be the unavoidable basis for our governments' public policy.

However, in any scenario we have to recognize that the largest number of jobs will always be created through private initiative in a stable environment. It is apparent as well that market forces alone have proven to be inadequate in generating a just distribution of wealth and in meeting the social needs of the poorest segments of the population in the areas of education, health, housing, and security. The time has come to recognize that fighting poverty and inequality also calls for clear, targeted public policies managed by governments endowed with resources and technical skills.

The fundamental task for policy and politicians is to solve people's problems and not create new ones, as often happens in our countries. One of the most important challenges facing us is to considerably enhance good governance in the region. In recent years we have experienced serious problems regarding political stability and the quality of public administration.

If we are to improve public policy in the Hemisphere, we must first of all expand and strengthen freedom in the Americas. Overcoming unemployment and poverty presupposes freer societies, in which all people are fully able to speak out and participate, with more justice, transparency, greater freedom of expression and association, and full respect for gender equality, and with respect for the diversity of original peoples, compatriots of African descent, the most vulnerable groups, and the millions of migrants and displaced people. By the same token, we must ensure greater security in the face of natural disasters, AIDS and pandemics, drug trafficking and organized crime, the spread of gangs, and terrorism. Only then can we have the full support of our peoples for the objectives we have set for ourselves.

In this regard we must make use of the basic instruments at our disposal. The Inter-American Democratic Charter sets out our full commitment to forge a community of free nations, whose governments not only develop democratically but also govern with full respect for the rule of law, guaranteeing the human rights of all their citizens at all times. The Charter is not simply an agreement among governments; it is also a victory for our peoples and, as such, it must be adhered to unconditionally.

In this context, all forms of diversity are always legitimate. We are very distinct nations, in terms of origin, size, wealth, and traditions. Let us share principles and policies but also recognize that there are different paths for achieving our objectives.

Distinguished Heads of State and Government:

The Organization of American States, together with the other institutions of the inter-American system, will continue to work in the years ahead, under your direction, to implement the Summit agreements and is prepared to take on any responsibilities you may assign to it. Doubtless these will include follow-up to the process we are launching today to create decent jobs, reduce poverty, and strengthen good governance; as well as planning the activities of our system and of the next Summit of the Americas.

Let us make this Summit a time for hope. Let us leave here convinced that we can live side by side, work, and move forward together. Let us see to it that the enormous efforts made by Argentina and its Government to so ably organize this meeting will bear fruit. Let us deal in a positive fashion with the considerable uncertainties besetting the peoples of the Americas today by sending a message of unity and of commitment to their greatest problems.