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**REMARKS BY PRESIDENT JUAN MANUEL SANTOS AT THE OPENING OF THE  
SIXTH SUMMIT OF THE AMERICAS**

April 14, 2012  
Cartagena de Indias, Colombia

Welcome, presidents and heads of government of the American nations, to the Sixth Summit of the Americas, to Colombia, and to this historic city of Cartagena de Indias!

Around this table we have the rich diversity of our peoples: different cultures, languages, races, environments, histories, and paths.

At the same time, beyond these differences, we are unified by the singular character, the exceptional nature, of a Hemisphere that contrasts with an uncertain and perilous world.

Here we have democracy, here we have peace among nations, here we have growth. Here we do not have irreconcilable rivalries or irrational extremisms. That is the foundation of our unity and our potential.

Upon that reality we can connect the Americas, build the bridges of unity we need to arrive at a shared vision of the future. This is not the rhetorical idealism of the past.

We face the unavoidable need to act together to be more effective in resolving the many challenges that still affect the welfare, tranquility, and prosperity of our peoples, to whom our deliberations are truly addressed.

The Americas are again the "New World," that Hemisphere that opened some unsuspected possibilities and horizons for humanity, a decisive force that can effectively impact the evolution of global affairs.

In our multipolar world, hemispheric and regional cohesion is decisive in a genuine conversation, in asserting our aspirations and the voice of our people. The old stereotype, in which some of us are from the south and others are from the north, is obsolete. Here we are all equal, if we want to make an impact.

Today I'd like to propose that we use this Summit to make this "the moment of the Americas."

A moment in which our Hemisphere emerges as a regional bloc with fundamental points of consensus for the prosperity and well-being of our peoples. Now it is truly possible.

First, because Latin America and the Caribbean have left behind many of the structural and institutional weaknesses that kept us tied to the past.

Secondly, because the traditional powers—among them our friend and neighbor, the United States—have already experienced the limits of the isolated exercise of power; they have learned that they alone cannot carry all the weight of maintaining balance and peace in the world.

As for Latin America, we have moved from being a problem region—tormented by economic crises and dictatorships—to being a source of responses and solutions to present-day challenges.

Our economies, for the most part, are growing more quickly than the world average, with low inflation, fiscal responsibility, and a solid external sector.

Our region has carried out the necessary economic reforms to ensure sustainable growth and stability.

Latin America has adapted to globalization by generating appropriate conditions, for example, to attract foreign investment.

All of this in a political context in which respect for fundamental rights and public freedoms prevail.

The region also has attached high priority to addressing poverty, investing significant resources in improving the quality of life of the most underdeveloped sectors. Forty million Latin Americans have emerged from poverty in the past decade.

Latin America, as a whole, now has a more genuine and effective institutional framework for decision-making, built not to divide, not to exclude, but to be more consistent and united.

Today, practically all the countries are united by various agreements that facilitate increasing flows of goods and services in the region and the Hemisphere.

Latin America is privileged in terms of natural resources: we have great energy surpluses, close to a quarter of the world's arable land, and a third of its fresh water. Our soil supports the greatest biological diversity on the planet.

This blessed geography gives us the muscle and authority to exert constructive influence on the discussion of international affairs.

And there is another highly important social aspect that now, more than ever, enhances opportunities to work together, from Alaska to Tierra del Fuego.

Just as migrants from the Old World contributed to the development of North America and generated solid ties of friendship and solidarity with Europe, we are sure that today, when Hispanics

are already the largest minority group in the United States--50 million inhabitants--their efforts, their struggle, their contributions will also establish ties and brotherhood throughout the Hemisphere.

In short, it is evident, it is clear, that there has been no better moment in history to build bridges in the Hemisphere and to take advantage of these and many other possibilities I have mentioned.

Without a doubt, it is also a matter of efficacy. We all know that many of the problems that dog us are shared problems.

On behalf of our people, we have the responsibility to take the most practical and effective path toward resolving those problems and challenges.

There is only one: it is the path of joining forces, of connecting our priorities, of having a specific shared agenda that will enhance collective action.

This Summit is the right place for moving in that direction. Because there is the risk—let's be frank—that we will be content simply with words, as often happens at so many summits.

Or that we will spend our time speaking for the record and to those at home, rather than taking the opportunity for dialogue, here, with each other.

The presidents and heads of government have NOT come to this Summit to comment on reality; we have come to transform it.

The nature of the challenges we face in the political, economic, environmental, and security arenas gives us no choice but to work hand in hand.

We must identify specific, feasible, and measurable actions that have funding and that, above all, will reach all the citizens of our Hemisphere.

May our good intentions not stop there—at good intentions—but become a palpable reality for our peoples.

The countries of Latin America are at a genuine turning point.

We have the chance to take a qualitative leap in our own development, and also to take a leap in our relations with the world, a chance we must not squander.

To meet that aim, we must unseat myths and prejudices, overthrow stereotypes, and leave behind anachronistic ideological ties. It's a question of approaching the future of the Hemisphere with a new paradigm: a paradigm in which what is most important is the interest of the people, the rights of the people.

Let this be our paradigm! The interests of the people, the interests of over 930 million people who inhabit this Hemisphere and who have the right, every right, to dream of a decent life, with equality, with justice, with development and peace.

To serve the people of the Americas we must commit ourselves to rethinking relations between Latin America and North America.

It is time to discard the stereotypes of the past, like that of Latin America as a problem region or the United States as an imperialistic power.

We must build physical bridges—and many are needed—but the most important bridges are political, economic, and social.

The countries to the south of the Rio Grande buy from the United States close to a quarter of its exports and provide it a fifth of its imports.

Bilateral trade between the United States and the region last year exceeded 800 billion dollars. This figure far exceeds, for example, trade between the United States and China, which was 500 billion dollars.

Canada, for its part, has more free trade agreements with countries of Latin America and the Caribbean than with all the rest of the world, and is an investor—hear this—in two of every three mining projects in the region.

There is no doubt, then, as to the profound economic interdependence that provides a very good basis for building the future. We are already partners in commerce, already partners in investment.

At this Summit, we can decide also to be partners in democratic prosperity and well-being. Realpolitik, with its cold calculations focusing on the interests of the state, may be effective—we don't doubt it—but we must always remember that it needs principles in order to be sustainable.

So, in today's world, we need a new paradigm that acknowledges that, in order to be effective, we need each other.

We need a sort of “pragmatism with principles,” a concept I heard spoken of once by the Secretary General of the United Nations and, more recently, by the Secretary of State of the United States, Hillary Clinton, in a speech at Georgetown University.

And at the risk of seeming naïve, that new paradigm is based on an attitude that seems simple but is something we need: efficacy.

It is a matter of building bridges, of recognizing the aspirations and fears of the other, of connecting politically on the basis of solidarity, seeking that unexpected creative angle, capable of unleashing dynamics that can resolve problems and shorten distances.

And I say so from experience, because along that avenue we have successfully approached challenges that seemed insurmountable.

Who could have imagined two years ago, after so much tension and discord, that Venezuela and Colombia would fully restore their relations and their friendship as good neighbors?

Who thought that our two countries, with such different visions, could conduct a concerted diplomatic effort to facilitate the restoration of normal institutional and democratic life in Honduras?

By building bridges, everything is possible.

As President of Colombia, and as host of this conference, I want to invite you to build bridges, bridges guided by our principles, always seeking effectiveness.

Just as the example of Venezuela and Colombia well illustrates the power and magic of seeking solutions through respect for differences, through cooperation and solidarity, other cases exemplify all the frustrations that result from a lack of concerted effort, a lack of effective bridges among us.

I refer to a matter close to my heart, the tragedy of Haiti. Observing what has happened there in the past decade, we find that every country cooperates in its own way with Haiti, and cooperates according to its own interests, creating a cacophony of good intentions and poor results.

Moreover, amid all that good will, what was most important was missing: knowing what the Haitian people really want and need.

Instead of promoting our own agendas, we should adopt the agenda of the country itself, of its own government, which knows better than any of us the urgent needs of its people. We must not come to the next Summit invoking hemispheric spirit if we are not first able to contribute, collectively, to Haiti's vigorous emergence from poverty, through the path of growth.

Another example of the consequences of not moving beyond old paradigms—the lack of bridges and creativity—is the case of Cuba.

Isolation, the embargo, indifference, looking the other way, have already proven ineffective. In today's world, that path is not justified. It is an anachronism tying us to a Cold War era that ended decades ago.

Just as another hemispheric summit with a prostrate Haiti would be unacceptable, the absence of Cuba would be unacceptable as well. We cannot remain indifferent to a process of change within Cuba that is ever more broadly recognized, and that change must continue.

It is time to overcome the paralysis of ideological stubbornness and seek minimum points of consensus to guide that process of change to a good outcome. For whose benefit? The benefit of the Cuban people. And for that we must build bridges.

Another example is the situation of Central America, so severely thrashed by organized crime that jeopardizes the very stability of those nations and the region.

The responsibility falls to us—their neighbors—especially to their closest neighbors, such as Mexico, Colombia and the United States—we who have already made immense sacrifices in fighting narco-trafficking—to offer formulas to help overcome this grave security crisis. Central America is not alone.

We must not come to the next Summit without decisive victories showing that we will free the Central American peoples from the grip of violence.

And let me mention also the case of my own country.

As you all know, Colombia has been in an intolerable conflict for over half a century, the longest-running internal conflict of the present day. Recently, we have made unprecedented progress toward resolving this conflict.

And we will continue doing so, not only with a firm security policy but also by addressing all the other circumstances that have helped to keep it alive: rural development and unemployment; displaced persons dispossessed of their lands and victims' reparations; illegal crops and narco-trafficking; and a weak institutional presence in a significant part of our territory.

We are convinced that, with these policies, we are building the true conditions for a lasting peace.

And regardless of the intent of those who commit violence, we will reach peace, though our determination and our progressive agenda.

And when I see that the minimum guarantees are in place for a credible and realistic conflict resolution process, I will not hesitate to launch it.

Lastly, there is another topic on which it would be wise to review the paradigms. There is one in particular.

I speak of the War on Drugs, which President Nixon declared in 1971, and which actually has lasted more than 100 years, since the International Opium Convention was signed in 1912.

Today, a century later, it would be wiser to stop and evaluate this approach, to simply determine where we are and where we are going.

Despite all the immense efforts and immense costs, we must recognize that the illegal drug trade continues in full force, drug addiction in the great majority of countries is a serious public health problem, and narco-trafficking remains the principal funding source for violence and terrorism.

Colombia, like many other countries of the region, believes that we must initiate a discussion and analysis on this topic, without prejudice or dogma, that considers various scenarios and possible alternatives for addressing this challenge more effectively.

This should be an open discussion, without ideological or political slants, a rigorous, evidence-based examination of the costs and benefits of each alternative. Of course, this discussion must not be used as an excuse to not do what we all know is indispensable: to firmly, vigorously, and unceasingly fight organized crime.

And it should be a discussion, of course, focused on people, on the victims of this business. The victims are consumers, drug addicts; the victims are those who suffer from the violence that

narco-trafficking generates; the victims are the millions of prison inmates in the world; the victims are citizens who suffer the effects of corruption; and, of course, the victims are the dead—so many dead!—killed in this business and in the fight against it.

This Summit will not resolve this issue, of course, but it can serve as a starting point for a discussion we have been postponing for too long.

I have spoken of the region's propitious moment, and of great possibilities in the Hemisphere. But we all know that on some great challenges, and on many fronts of collective action, we have failed to make progress.

At this Sixth Summit, we have chosen five challenges, all highly important, to examine in seeking our path toward this joint effort.

We seek to connect the Americas, so that our nations will be true partners in prosperity.

This means working, with the support of multilateral institutions, to develop programs and projects for physical infrastructure and electrical interconnection to integrate the Americas.

This also means promoting joint initiatives to increase our peoples' access to the advantages of technology and communications.

We are also talking about establishing appropriate coordination to prevent and respond to natural disasters, which are increasingly frequent and devastating, including those caused by climate change.

Right here in Colombia, we have suffered and continue to suffer. Almost half of my country is flooded—the severest wave of winter weather in our history, with millions of people affected.

No one can deny the reality of climate change and the urgent need to prepare to face it and mitigate its effects.

Another essential topic is public security, which the inhabitants of the Americas see as one of their greatest problems.

There is a lot we can do together to prevent and fight violence, corruption, and organized crime, and Colombia has much to offer in this area, where we have made progress and learned lessons.

Finally, the essential priority topic of reducing poverty and inequality should also be on our table.

It is remarkable that, between 2001 and 2010, poverty in Latin America declined from 44 to 31 per cent.

But these improvements, as important as they are, are not enough.

All of our efforts should be directed, as a matter of priority, to turning economic prosperity into social prosperity. Here the conclusions of the social actors forum held at the same time as this Summit are very valuable.

And speaking of economic prosperity, let me stress that this week, for the first time, we had a simultaneous summit of business leaders of the Hemisphere, which brought together the primary private-sector leaders of the Americas.

It was a summit which not only discussed business, opportunities, and investment, but also explored making private initiative a central participant in job creation and a partner in eliminating inequality.

Because there is no point to growth, there is no point to macroeconomic stability and free trade, if it all fails to narrow social gaps and provide more opportunities for income, for employment, and for a better quality of life for our peoples.

Let us never forget that this Summit involves not only governments, not only political interests: IT INVOLVES PEOPLE, people with needs, some of them urgent, people who demand our effective and coordinated action.

So here we have the major challenges of this Summit.

We must face them with a sense of American solidarity and humanity. Because only working hand in hand, only by changing the paradigms, can we build a better world for all.

I invite us to build bridges.

I invite us to be partners in prosperity.

To be partners for our people.

And I invite us to hear what this little girl said, what a little hummingbird told us, and told me: BEING MORE UNITED, WE WILL BE A BETTER AMERICA!

Thank you very much.