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**STATEMENT BY THE HONOURABLE KAMLA PERSAD BISSESSAR, SC, MP
PRIME MINISTER OF THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO
AT THE PLENARY SESSION OF THE VII SUMMIT OF THE AMERICAS**

Thank you Excellency, President of Panama and Chairman of the VII Summit of the Americas, Distinguished Heads of Government and your delegations, Secretary General of the OAS and other institutions, Distinguished ladies and gentlemen,

May I take a moment to thank the President of Panama for your very warm welcome and hospitality extended to us during our visit to Panama. Excellency and First Lady, may I thank you very much for what was truly an exhilarating experience last night when we saw your history being recreated. Today we are speaking about history and last night showed the trials and tribulations all our nations have been able to surpass.

We are very blessed to witness a very historic event here in Panama City, the invitation for the first time of our colleague Raul Castro, something I know members around this table have worked on for very long in advocacy, pleading the cause for Cuba to be admitted in the Summit of the Americas. Cuba's presence here is testimony to the fact that not only have we turned a very stark page in the history books but also to the importance of dialogue. And therefore I want to pay tribute to President Castro and President Obama because this will be part of their legacy in history as the leaders in their respective countries to make this historic moment happen and we as witnesses to something that has been truly important.

But even as we speak of this historic event, seeing the coming together of the countries of the Americas, we are also witnessing a fracture, a schism, which gives us cause for great concern at this time. So whilst we celebrate this time with President Castro of Cuba, I think it is also incumbent for us to remember that our neighbour and friend, Venezuela, is placed in a very difficult position and if you look up at that board (map) there is North America, Central America and South America. But we from the Caribbean, we are the stepping stones in the sea. We are right off the coast of Venezuela and then the stepping stones take you right up to the United States. Yesterday when we were in Jamaica for the CARICOM/United States Summit, I said to President Obama that the Caribbean is like the fourth border and indeed it is the most porous border in the region which connects the two great continents in the western hemisphere and therefore we celebrate. But as the President of Argentina said earlier, that celebration comes almost simultaneously with the news of our friend and neighbour in CELAC and the Summit of the Americas with respect to the Executive Order against Venezuela.

As I said earlier, what happened between Cuba and the United States of America has been the result of dialogue. I didn't see Cuba picking up arms to invade the United States of vice versa. But the struggle continued in the voices of the people and the voices of the leaders in the region.

Therefore, what I advocate, President Maduro, is that we collectively raise our voices again, and also individually as nations in the region, that we raise our voices against this Executive Order, which you reminded me that there was once such an Executive Order in history which was followed by invasion. So whilst an Executive Order on paper is not an act or declaration of war, it gives us great cause for concern.

I make these opening comments after we heard from the Presidents of the United States, Cuba and Venezuela. There is a saying in the Caribbean that, "when the elephants frolic and play, the grass gets trampled." We are like the grass in CARICOM, very tiny nation states, but very independent and in favour of democracy and the rule of law. We believe inherently in the sovereignty of nations and so we stand with you President Maduro for your sovereignty and for the determination of the right of your people to be governed as they choose. And I ask for us around this table, it is incumbent for us at this time, in the early days of the Executive Order, to speak now and have the Executive Order removed.

We are thirty-three (33) nations in CELAC and we have already signed onto a declaration in that regard. CARICOM represents fourteen (14) of the thirty-three (33) nations. And of this Summit of the Americas of thirty-five (35) nations, the only two (2) countries added to the CELAC countries are our friends Prime Minister Harper of Canada and President Obama of the United States of America. So, out of the thirty-five (35) countries represented here today, thirty-three (33) have said that this decree is unwarranted and should be withdrawn. CARICOM has a strong voice, it is half of CELAC countries and half of the Summit of the Americas so while we are small and tiny, we have a voice on this issue.

With regard to the theme of the Summit, "Prosperity with Equity: The Challenge of Cooperation in the Americas," that is one of the challenges-the elephants-in terms of what is happening in our nations and our right to sovereignty.

As the President of Argentina said, one of the greatest challenges for us in the Americas is the issue of citizen security. For some of our nations, we are becoming the world's most homicidal nations. In the lower and mid-income countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, we have the highest homicide rates of any developing region and the highest proportion of homicides committed with firearms, according to the Global Status Report on Violence Prevention 2014, released in January 2015 in Geneva.

Once a bullet leaves a gun, it has no friends. Trinidad and Tobago is not immune to this reality, and it is because of the challenges of the illicit trade in small arms that we heralded the coming into force on December 24, 2014 of the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT). That Treaty is a victory for the international community because while weapons of mass destruction may be key weapons in war, for our countries small arms cause the most deaths in the region. So we welcome this Treaty. But many nations have not signed this Treaty so I use this opportunity to implore you to do so. Further I thank the President of Mexico and his officials because they have agreed to serve as the provisional secretariat for the ATT. And for us in Trinidad and Tobago, we hosted the First Preparatory Meeting Toward The First Conference of States Parties to the Arms Trade Treaty in February, 2015. We have offered our candidacy for Secretariat of the ATT and we do so fully cognizant that we are small nation states, but also fully cognizant that there must be a shift in the geo-spatial arrangement which is to say we should not continue to place all our world institutions in the northern hemisphere. Therefore we offer Trinidad and Tobago as a new space for the hosting of the Secretariat of the ATT and we kindly ask that you consider giving us your support. CARICOM has already given us their support.

There are several other areas: health and education. Like other leaders have expressed, we do believe that education is the only passport out of poverty. If we are talking about equity, then we must spend more GDP on education. Education is the only key to a better quality of life. And therefore in the region, if we are looking at barriers/challenges with respect to distribution of wealth, education must play a key role.

We are happy in Trinidad and Tobago that we have attained free universal primary and secondary education and we have already overstepped our target for 2015 where we have reached a 65% participation rate for tertiary education. On a promise I made to the electorate, I am proud to say that every student from forms 1-5 has a laptop because we must prepare our young people for competitiveness in the global environment.

Technology must be tied to education. My first Prime Minister used to say, "The future of your nation is in the book-bags of your children," but I say that the future of our nations are in the computers in the book-bags of our children.

With regard to Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs), we made a declaration at the Fifth Summit of the Americas in Port-of-Spain in 2009 that we must pay particular attention to NCDs because when we look at the statistics we see NCDs are responsible for over thirty eight (38) million deaths per annum in the Americas and it is estimated that eighty-one (81) percent of all deaths in Latin America and the Caribbean will be caused by NCDs by the year 2030.

What we must now have is a concerted effort in energy, security and governance in the region.

I thank you Mr. President and let me express my concern to the President and people in Chile for the natural disasters they have experienced.