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**REMARKS BY PRESIDENT JUAN MANUEL SANTOS CALDERÓN
AT THE PLENARY SESSION OF THE VIII SUMMIT OF THE AMERICAS**

I must begin by again condemning most emphatically the murders of the journalists in Ecuador.

We wish to express our solidarity to President Lenin Moreno, who should have been here at his first Summit, but had to return to his country owing to this reprehensible act.

We have provided him with our full support and collaboration from the outset, and will continue to do so until the perpetrators are apprehended and brought to justice.

I think I speak for this entire Summit when I tell Ecuador that we are with them at this difficult time.

We also add our voice to that of the civilized world in vehemently and forcefully condemning the repetition of the use of chemical weapons in Syria.

This is not the first time that chemical weapons have been used on Syrian soil.

Colombia always has condemned and always will condemn the use of chemical weapons by any actor or State, no matter the circumstances.

Colombia is party to international treaties and a member of organizations aiming to eliminate chemical weapons. We will never stand down from this pursuit and we support actions to punish their use and to seek their total elimination.

I call on the international community to preserve peace, engage in dialogue, and avoid escalation of the conflict.

I am delighted to again be attending the Summit of the Americas, and to be doing so in this dear sister nation of Peru, which is extending us every hospitality today.

This is the third and final Summit I have attended as my country's president, but the first not marred by armed conflict with the FARC guerrilla.

This has been—and must be—a forum where the Heads of State and Government of the Hemisphere can forge ahead in building a better future for all.

We come here to address manifold challenges in various areas, but fully prepared to build bridges that will allow us to tackle them.

One such challenge for us as a region that we must face together is unquestionably the fight against corruption.

This is nothing new: corruption is an enemy that has festered worldwide for years.

It is a serious crime, another form of violence that does NOT stop at our countries' borders.

Worse still, it creates a vicious circle that hinders social and economic development, increases poverty, leads to distrust, and debilitates societies.

That is precisely why we must tackle it as a region and join forces and commitments in order to be more effective. Although difficult and complex, it is necessary.

The reason why corruption is more visible today than before is largely because authorities have better tools to expose and combat it.

In Colombia's case, I must confess that despite making considerable, very considerable progress, I feel somewhat frustrated that more has not been done. We still have a long way to go, especially locally and regionally.

We have launched an anti-corruption strategy, our roadmap for this campaign.

We are shutting down, winding up, or transforming entities that were infected by this scourge.

We are bringing forward comprehensive anti-corruption legislation, whose effects have been very positive.

We have established open and transparent public procurement mechanisms, in addition to making mandatory the use of standard tender documents to ensure the transparency of the bidding process.

We have implemented the recommendations that arose from the first Anti-Corruption Summit, which I had the honor of co-chairing in 2016 with then-British Prime Minister David Cameron.

I must repeat, however, that while we are making progress in building a more transparent country, we still have much to do. And I do not think I am wrong in saying that the rest of the region feels the same way.

We recently saw how a single multinational corporation was able to defile public and private entities in a number of our countries. And I want to stress something here: the private sector must also play its part in this fight.

Let's not forget that he who sins for pay is as guilty as he who pays for sin.

United, we—the public and private sectors—must keep up the pressure to defeat this enemy as old as time.

I applaud the signature of the Lima Commitment at this Summit to confirm our common resolve to combat corruption.

I can tell you from experience that when nations pool their efforts and work together, the criminals always lose.

With globalization, corruption has become transnational and requires a multilateral response.

In hunting down those guilty of corruption and organized crime, there can be no borders.

We must use the international agreements we have to strengthen cooperation, share experiences, and learn more from one another.

There are also two aspects I consider instrumental in the fight against corruption that we must take into account.

The first is the power of civic engagement. Citizens are our greatest allies in combating corruption and we must empower them for this reason. Each citizen should be keeping a watchful eye.

The second, very important aspect is education—good, quality education—because this is the most effective prevention tool to address this rot.

We must provide more education on the importance of always conducting ourselves in keeping with sound principles and values.

The first step in overcoming corruption is to change the way people think, to restore a culture of lawfulness. We cannot overlook the fact that education is also the most powerful tool for promoting equity, development, and peace-building.

That is why I applaud the commitment made at this Summit to promote an agreement with multilateral entities to achieve major strides in education. This is a great decision.

Education has been a priority for my government, fortunately with very good results.

In Colombia, we have been pouring most of our budget into education for four consecutive years.

And it is precisely in the budget where the priorities are evident.

With these additional resources, we implemented a comprehensive early childhood policy, offered free education to more than 8.5 million boys and girls, and increased access to higher education by nearly 20 percentage points, in addition to substantially improving PISA test results.

May I conclude with a brief reference to Venezuela.

Of all nations, Colombia is that most affected by the desperate situation of the Venezuelan people. For this reason, we have the greatest interest in seeing democracy, respect for human rights, and civility itself restored in our sister nation.

We have been and continue to be generous with the Venezuelan people. They are our brothers and sisters, but we will not tolerate the country's oppressive regime, which is causing so much harm not only to Colombia but also the region as a whole.

The regime invented a spurious constituent assembly that we rejected outright and refused to recognize because it was the final blow to what little was left of the democratic institutional system.

That same illegitimate body and the regime that wants to perpetuate itself in power called an election that all of us here must also repudiate.

We said it as soon as it was called and we repeat today: we will not recognize the results of an election meant to disguise a dictatorship.

Meanwhile, the social and economic crisis is worse with each passing day, something ironically used by the government to repress civilians more and more each day.

Again we ask Maduro to allow in international humanitarian aid. It is astonishing that he continues to be in denial in the face of such an obvious crisis, while the whole world watches in shock as the Venezuelan people literally die of hunger.

According to the latest calculations, this disaster has forced as much as 15 percent of the population to flee, much of it to Colombia. What is more worrying is that this figure could climb much higher.

Colombia and the region must not cease their efforts to ensure that the Venezuelans recover the freedom they so seek.

As I bid farewell, I have only to thank you with all my heart for your friendship and ongoing support for progress, well-being, and, above all, peace-building in Colombia.

Let us continue on this historic journey together, working tirelessly for development and transparency and to protect our greatest asset: the environment and our extraordinary biodiversity, as identified by Von Humboldt over 200 years ago. The citizens of our great continent demand and deserve it.

Thank you very much.

(End)