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**INAUGURAL SPEECH
BY LUIS ALMAGRO LEMES,
SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE ORGANIZATION OF AMERICAN STATES**

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Your Excellencies President Martín Vizcarra

Heads of State and Government of the Americas

Heads of Delegations.

As we all must realize, we have a problem and will continue to have one. Corruption is a hereditary autoimmune disease in any political system run by human beings. It recognizes no frontiers, be they ideological or political, and may not even be thwarted by strong institutions.

Corruption scandals throughout the Hemisphere in recent years have brought the problem out into the open, giving the impression that the phenomenon is new or more pronounced in democratic contexts. Nothing could be further from the truth. The disease of corruption, which destroys even the healthy and well-intentioned parts of the body politic, has been relentless and present throughout history, particularly when the patient has tried to ignore it.

It is not due to democracy but thanks to democracy that nowadays the problem is aired more frankly, forcing us to confront it.

What we have to fight is the disease, not the system.

When we judge corruption, as many of our countries now do, the outlook ceases to be so pessimistic. The intention here is to be realistic. Realism is a prerequisite for tackling corruption. We need to start from a core premise, borrowed from the Nobel Prize-winning author, John Steinbeck: “It isn’t that the evil thing wins — it never will — but that it doesn’t die.” Corruption cannot be completely destroyed. No country in the world has zero corruption. Some have more of it than others. But we need to beat it. And we need to do so in democracy.

The good news is that we are standing up to it throughout the Hemisphere and have discovered that even though corruption may never die, we can drive it into a corner, we can bring about the necessary institutional and cultural changes and beat it.

To win that battle, we need to know its causes and the new forms it takes on in democracy, especially young democracies like those in Latin America. There are many reasons why we need to prevail in the fight against corruption. Many of them have to do with the moral argument that the misuse of power and impunity are immoral – which they are.

It is obvious that someone holding public office should not rob the money that people pay in taxes nor use influence for personal gain. Those that enter public services need to understand once and for all that politics is not a career for becoming rich. If they want to make money, we should steer them in other directions. There have been studies quantifying the economic cost and opportunity cost of corruption pointing to the evident harm done to economic and social development. That, too, is true.

As for the relation between corruption and human rights, at least two different angles have been analyzed.

Some have studied whether corruption, as an act committed by public officials, in itself constitutes a violation of human rights. The fact is: it undoubtedly does, in that it undermines the basic principles of a democracy of equal opportunities for all. Only those who can buy them have access to rights. Corruption also collides with the public interest by superimposing the private interests of officials on the public interest.

It is the second angle, which clearly is a consequence of the first, what worries us most: namely, when corruption weakens institutions to such an extent that impunity becomes the norm.

When that happens, the guarantees afforded by law vanish. Rights are relativized, toppling or completely distorting the rule of law.

Civil society's ability to denounce what is going on is reduced to a bare minimum when the counterbalances established in constitutions to provide safeguards for citizens and set fundamental limits on what one or all branches of government may do cease to be legally effective and also cease to be valid instruments for stopping corruption, human rights violations, or environmental disasters.

The so-called "forces of order" (security forces) may trample on rights for no reason with the complicity of the other branches of government, creating the conditions for the worst aberrations. The most corrupt societies are also those in which the protection of human rights deteriorates.

I will mention what I regard as the most relevant facets in the current circumstances of the region.

Corruption spurs further corruption and much more quickly than democracy can defend itself. That causes political instability and undermines the formal institutional framework, while at the same time constructing a parallel framework comprised of evil and contagious practices.

Presidents who have resigned, are tried and imprisoned, or are pressured into certain courses of action and end up taking steps to disguise and mitigate the pressure are just the most visible side to the problem.

Corrupt practices at the highest level of the power structure almost certainly mean that there is support for them from the levels behind and underlying it. Moreover, middle and lower ranks in the hierarchy follow suit and mimic the leadership's permissiveness of corrupt practices. For that reason, there is no room for tolerance. Zero tolerance for corruption.

When the disease is so advanced, corruption is capable of permeating an entire political system, from top to bottom, and infecting even day-to-day routines in society, such as obtaining a number in order to perform a basic bureaucratic procedure.

Also worrying is the discrediting of public service caused by corruption. That is one of the consequences of the wave of scandals and civic protests and their impact on the perceptions of new generations. Persistent corruption in politics attracts the wrong kind of people, ill-suited for public office, while it discourages and deters those who have a genuine vocation to serve.

Then politics acquires a negative connotation, synonymous with dirty. Getting involved entails taking numerous risks, including constant live exposure on social networks. There is also a politically mistaken notion that for the government to operate, a certain amount of corruption is necessary. That is completely unacceptable.

If we want honest political leadership making democracy deeper and more pervasive, instead of contaminating it, we need, here and now, to score more (and more resounding) victories against corruption, that show politics and public service in a more favorable light. That won't happen free of charge and society should not give it away lightly.

More democracy has to be won through actions and outcomes, by trying and convicting the corrupt, by forging stronger institutions. There, our mission must not fail. Nor do we have all the time in the world to achieve it. Slowness and media attention for purposes that have nothing to do with the fight against corruption are unacceptable. We need investigators and investigation. We need institutional commitment. We need to deal with the root causes that let corruption survive in the political system. We need to eradicate the causes of impunity.

We need to grasp the fact that we need to do this, that wasting time, be it two days or two years, only does the corrupt or corruption a favor.

That partly explains our malaise at the way the Mission to Support the Fight against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras (MACCIH) was operating, but we have largely cured its inefficiency and dealt with its internal irregularities. Now that it is stronger, it faces more trouble from those that attacked it unjustly based on the changes and conditions it faces, but nothing is going to stop the positive effects to come.

It is vital to beat corruption because it has constantly fueled citizen dissatisfaction with democracy. That is to say, the disease of corruption weakens democracy and starts to make parts of it increasingly dysfunctional.

Mistrust of political parties and dissatisfaction with the system increased in 2017, according to reliable surveys by Latinobarómetro.

What is paradoxical is that the greater the disillusionment and disappointment with democracy associated with anti-corruption efforts, the greater the likelihood of messianic candidates and demagogic forms of populism, with little concern for stronger institutions, gaining ground and power.

It is ironic that citizens' rejection of corruption should pave the way for candidacies that are as bad or worse than what was initially rejected, that they should arise demagogically, as if the fight against corruption were a fight against democracy.

There are no magical recipes, but we need to use politics to defend citizens' rights, because that is the most efficient way to attack the problem.

Although it is difficult to draw up a list of specific solutions, it is feasible to agree on a target and a shared roadmap as a framework for our actions. Our cooperation and international solidarity are needed, so it is necessary to push on with the plans and proposals set forth in the Lima Commitment.

We cannot accept corruption by promoting anti-democratic solutions and applying a messianic model, removed from the scrutiny and rights of people, as such schemes only end up boosting the impunity of the authorities and dismantling the factors that make for an independent judiciary. Clearly the justice system needs to combat impunity. Equally truly, justice is not synonymous with lynching.

Systems that claim that nothing bad is happening act as if corruption were someone else's problem. It is never prosecuted and pretends to be practically non-existent. This is what happened for most of the time when Odebrecht and PDVSA were operating and much the same transpires from the so-called Panama and Paradise papers.

While some reactions and condemnations have been triggered, the temptation to yield to impunity for the sake of so-called "governance" or preservation of the system has prevailed on several occasions. That happens when fighting corruption turns into a decorative stance to ensure governance, not justice, and when the protagonists of the fight against corruption turn into media stars or join the ranks of the same political circles.

The tools or missions for combating corruption cannot be pure show. They have to be efficient and fast, and resolutely committed to scientific methods of investigation.

We ask that the instruments for fighting corruption be strengthened in the same way that we strengthened instruments for defending human rights in the inter-American system. The Follow-Up Mechanism to the Inter-American Convention against Corruption (MESICIC) needs to be endowed

with sufficient resources to enable it to perform better missions, to keep more effective track of the implementation of its recommendations, to ensure that they are in fact implemented and put into practice, and not transformed into merely bureaucratic or repetitive exercises.

In reality, with respect to corruption, we only have one option: to face it and fight it to the end.

Fighting always seems more difficult. But fight we must. Gradually, within our societies and democracy itself, we need to make that transition whereby each case of a high level of corruption and impunity is turned into a victory over impunity and a victory for the certainty of justice done.

Each citizen, each educator, each of us, regardless of age, is responsible for achieving an indispensable cultural change. Clearly, it is not just we leaders, politicians, and diplomats who have to take that path. This route is one in which we all have a part to play. Shared responsibility is the cost we pay for freedom and democracy.

Each step in the fight against corruption matters.

The ultimate antidote to corruption is that contained in the values and principles of our hemispheric community: democracy, human rights, fundamental guarantees, and fundamental freedoms.

In order not to fail in this endeavor, we must focus our efforts on the three bastions of our collective hemispheric existence.

Honoring the historic legacy of our predecessors means working every day for more democratic States in which the promotion and protection of human rights is the priority and freedom the rule, because that brings us closer to solving the corruption issue.

Anchoring our principles firmly in those values and setting our sights on a prosperous Hemisphere.

It is always worth remembering that the corrupt and the oppressive are close relatives.

For their part, corrupt opportunists find no better setting in which to flourish than dictatorships or weakness of the rule of law.

We have to demonstrate that human rights must always be protected under any circumstances, because that is the most effective way to combat corruption. An extreme example of the most abject contempt for human rights that dictatorships are capable of is the chemical weapons attack by the Syrian Government on its own population. Faced with such crimes against humanity we cannot remain silent. We must act.

Our predecessors were wise when they built the legal and political toolbox our hemispheric community benefits from today; we need to be true to what they stood for and resolve fundamental issues because that means taking a step further toward liberation from corruption.

And it is vital, and inherent in our values, to recover democracy for citizens throughout the Hemisphere, including those who today live deprived of the rule of law and freedoms.

In our minds and souls we must remember political prisoners, family members of the victims of repression, those who suffer hunger and disease, those who cannot vote or express themselves without fear, who are looking at us and hearing what we say. Looking the other way is also a form of corruption.

To all those who ever suffered a dictatorship and all those who do not deserve to endure one ever, we must be accountable every day, knowing that our debt as leaders will never be settled until we enjoy a prosperous, safe Hemisphere, without corruption and with 35 free nations respectful of human rights and living in democracy.

Thank you.