



SUMMIT IMPLEMENTATION REVIEW GROUP (SIRG)
First Meeting at the Ministerial Level of 2023
June 23, 2023
Washington, D.C.

OEA/Ser.E
GRIC/M.1/INF.22/23
26 June 2023
Original: English

REMARKS BY THE CHAIR OF THE SIRG

(Mr. Antony Blinken, Secretary of State of the United States of America)

Mr. Secretary General, distinguished guests: *Buenos días. Bonjour. Bom dia.*

I'm honored to be with you once again in the House of the Americas.

More than 75 years ago, our nations came together to affirm what the OAS Charter called the “indispensable” role of democracy in delivering on security, human rights, development, and other vital needs of people across the hemisphere.

At the heart of the OAS Charter – and the Inter-American Democratic Charter – is the recognition that the fates of our individual democracies are bound up in one another. And that when it comes to improving the lives of our citizens, our democracies are better together.

Yet, as we meet today, a number of governments in the Americas are questioning the relevance of the OAS, and democracy more broadly, to solve the problems facing many people across the hemisphere. A lack of economic opportunity and inequity... widespread insecurity and endemic corruption... an accelerating climate crisis. All problems that have helped drive an unprecedented number of people from their homes.

So, we find ourselves at a moment of reckoning. Do we still believe democracy is the best system to deliver for our people? And if so, are we willing to recommit ourselves to strengthening our fellow democracies and the institutions where we work together?

The United States answer to this question is unequivocal: We believe in democracy – in its enduring capacity for renewal and revitalization. We believe it is still the best way to meet the needs of our citizens and people across the region.

And we believe in the OAS – both in its capacity to improve our individual democracies, and unite us to solve problems that none of us can tackle alone.

As President Jimmy Carter said to the OAS decades ago, to make our charter “more than empty pieces of paper – to make it a living document” – all of our member states must believe, and act, to uphold and improve it.

Today, I'd like to make the case for how we can recommit ourselves, together, to make our charters a living thing for people across our hemisphere.

First, we can continue to support and strengthen the OAS's core competencies – where it has a proven track record of improving our democracies in concrete ways.

The OAS electoral observation missions are the gold standard for providing an independent, impartial assessment of whether elections are free and fair. In 2023 alone, the OAS has observed elections in Antigua and Barbuda, Ecuador, and Paraguay, and will observe Guatemala's presidential vote on June 25th – two days from now.

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights has for decades provided a forum for citizens in all of our nations to seek justice for human rights violations and abuses – from the enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings of the Dirty Wars and the drug wars... to the report it published last week concluding Cuban government agents were involved in the 2012 deaths of human rights defenders Oswaldo Payá and Harold Cespero. And the Commission has been a trailblazer in promoting the rights of historically marginalized populations, including people of African descent, Indigenous communities, and LGBTQI+ people.

The Americas Health Corps will train half a million health workers over five years on key topics such as maternal and child health. And we're on our way – having trained 119,000 in the last year.

Longstanding strengths like these are the reason our Ambassador to the OAS, Frank Mora, fought so hard to rally support for one of the biggest increases to the organization's budget in decades. The United States funds approximately half of that budget, thanks to the support of our Congress.

I want to thank CARICOM for spearheading the effort to approve this crucial increase, without which the OAS would have had to cut dozens of staff positions.

We also fully support the outside review of the OAS General Secretariat, so we can ensure people of the Americas are getting the most out of the resources we all contribute.

Second, we can recommit to holding ourselves – and countries across the region – to the core principles of the OAS and Inter-American Democratic Charters.

That of course means continuing to shine a spotlight on the widespread violations of human rights perpetrated by authoritarian governments, and looking for ways to hold them accountable – and stop their repression – as we seek to aid their victims.

But that's only part of it.

We also have to speak up when our fellow democracies stray from the principles we all agreed repeatedly to uphold.

When democratically elected leaders in our region try to weaken the independent institutions that provide checks and balances... when they crack down on the media and civil society; when they fire or harass prosecutors, judges, election officials, and other independent government officials for doing their jobs; when they try to extend term limits; when they attack or try to discredit multilateral institutions, including this one, for raising legitimate criticisms... we cannot stand by. We must speak up.

Not because any of our member states thinks we're perfect. We know we're not. But rather because we're invested in each other's democracies, and because we made a commitment to hold one another to account. Because we know one of the most dangerous steps a government can take is to strip away citizens' right to improve the system from within. And because we know the risks inherent in backsliding – not just to individual countries and their citizens, but to entire regions.

The United States is not immune from this. Throughout our history, we've grappled with challenges to our democracy. We continue to grapple with them to this day.

Indeed, these experiences underscore for us the importance of always striving to address our own shortcomings – and to do it out in the open, transparently – not to pretend they don't exist, or sweep them under the rug – because we know that's the only way to get better... to form a more perfect union.

That's why we open ourselves up to review – and criticism – from journalists, human rights defenders, and regional and multilateral organizations. That includes from the OAS and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, which has recently conducted site visits in the United States to focus on homelessness, indigenous rights, and climate change.

Third, and finally, we must continue to adapt our institutions and partnerships to seize emerging opportunities and meet emerging threats. Never has the need to do this been so acute. Look at any of the big challenges affecting people in our hemisphere – not one can we solve alone. That's why President Biden has worked relentlessly to reinvigorate institutions like the OAS – and stand up new coalitions across our region and the world – to deliver for our people.

We brought together countries at the Summit of the Americas in Los Angeles to adopt the LA Declaration on Migration and Protection – the first truly regional approach to this issue – and 21 countries have signed on with concrete commitments to make it real. Together with civil society, the private sector, humanitarian organizations, and multilateral and regional organizations, we continue to drive progress on the pledges we made – work we'll continue later today, when I'll convene a Ministerial meeting of our partners.

In April, we convened the first-ever Cities Summit of the Americas, in Denver, Colorado, bringing together hundreds of mayors and governors, tribal and indigenous officials, and leaders from communities, NGOs, and businesses. Participants shared innovative ideas, knowledge, and approaches, and forged new partnerships – at the level where democracy is closest to the people it serves. Most of all, we listened... took notes... learned.

We're working together to expand inclusive economic opportunities across the Americas. We're broadening access to the emerging technologies that are increasingly crucial for doing business. We've launched a new economic agenda – the Americas Partnership for Economic Prosperity – to build more equitable growth from the bottom up and from the middle out. And we're making a push for multilateral development institutions like the World Bank to increase financing for the region's middle-income economies, as Vice President Harris discussed with our friends in CARICOM and other partners a few weeks ago at the U.S.-Caribbean Leaders Meeting.

And today, we're launching a new global coalition to address the public health and security threats posed by the illicit production and trafficking of fentanyl and other synthetic drugs. We

encourage countries across the region to join us in this effort. The Centers for Disease Control estimates that approximately 110,000 Americans died of a drug overdose in 2022. More than two-thirds of those deaths involved synthetic opioids, inflicting immeasurable suffering on families across our nation. There's not a country in our hemisphere that is not being hurt by this scourge, or by the transnational organized crime groups who profit from it. And we know that the only way to confront it is together. In a few weeks, I'll convene dozens of my counterparts from around the world for the coalition's inaugural meeting.

Esteemed colleagues, I said at the outset that the United States continues to believe that when it comes to fulfilling the aspirations of people across our hemisphere – there is no better way than democracies working together.

But of all the reasons I'm confident that our democracies can ultimately deliver to meet the significant challenges we face, there is one that eclipses all the others: our citizens still believe in democracy. The latest annual survey from Latinobarómetro shows that – even if most people in our hemisphere agree democracies can and should work better – two-thirds of citizens still believe democracy is the best form of government to meet their needs. Two in three. That's actually an increase from a few years ago.

And if our citizens still believe in democracy... if they are still invested in making us better from within, in holding us accountable... there is no flaw we cannot fix, and no challenge we cannot overcome in the enduring march to make the rights and hopes of our people a living thing. Thank you.