



59th DIRECTING COUNCIL

73rd SESSION OF THE REGIONAL COMMITTEE OF WHO FOR THE AMERICAS

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**OPENING REMARKS BY THE HON. MR. XAVIER BECERRA,
SECRETARY OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA**

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**59th Directing Council of PAHO
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Distinguished leaders and delegates,

I am honored to welcome you to Washington D.C., albeit virtually, for the Pan American Health Organization's 59th Directing Council. My heartfelt gratitude to Director Etienne and Deputy Director Valdez for their tremendous leadership in combating this pandemic.

I know PAHO and its staff have gone above and beyond the call of duty to fight COVID-19, and we all thank them for their incredible work. I also want to extend my country's gratitude to all of the front-line and essential workers for their remarkable service and sacrifice throughout this crisis. There is no other way to put it, our Region, the Americas, is in the fight of its life, and it is a fight we must and will win, but in order to win we must come together to make each other stronger and that starts with strengthening our health systems, domestically and globally. Simply put, we must build a stronger, more effective, more agile system that has wherewithal and the authority to prevent or control the next outbreak before it becomes a pandemic.

The United States is committed to strengthening the World Health Organization (WHO), and through the working group on Preparedness and Response, WHO Member States have a unique opportunity to build consensus for a modern institution that can harness the lessons of our experiences with the speed of our digital world. The United States will work with its fellow WHO and PAHO Member States to strengthen WHO, and we will consider the benefits and challenges of developing a WHO Convention, an agreement or other instrument, on Pandemic Preparedness and Response. As we do so, we must remember to focus on existing legal mechanisms, to strengthen WHO, and to move quickly to address gaps and areas of urgent need.

The United States is committed to ensuring an equitable pandemic response and recovery, simply put. And while the COVID-19 pandemic intensified inequities in the Americas and around the world we must not let it derail our goals of advancing health and well-being for all our people. We are proud to have directly donated 38 million COVID-19 vaccines doses to 15 countries in Latin America to date. It represents a critical portion of the hundreds of millions of doses that President Biden has committed to the world for 2021. We look forward to sharing more in the months ahead, as supplies become available.

We are also prioritizing equity in all policies including addressing racial, gender and other forms of inequality, promoting sexual and reproductive health and rights, preventing and controlling non-communicable diseases, tackling the climate crisis, and addressing the broader social economic and environmental determinants of health. In the Americas, we have experienced the devastation of climate change, the destruction of greed and lawlessness, and the divisiveness

of politics. But despite these challenges, we have always come together when it really mattered—it really matters now. We must unite to strengthen WHO, PAHO and other health systems in our countries. I look forward to being a good partner with you in meeting this challenge.

Thank you very much.
