



58th DIRECTING COUNCIL

72nd SESSION OF THE REGIONAL COMMITTEE OF WHO FOR THE AMERICAS

Virtual Session, 28-29 September 2020

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**OPENING REMARKS BY THE HON. MR. IVÁN DUQUE MÁRQUEZ
PRESIDENT OF COLOMBIA**

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The entire world is facing its greatest challenge in recent history as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, and Colombia has not been on the sidelines. We feel for the thousands of Colombians who have lost their lives and I want to begin by expressing our feelings of solidarity. I want our compatriots to know that we truly are with them in these difficult times when a loved one is lost.

In this pandemic, all human beings are sailing uncharted waters. All the world's nations have had to learn quickly, adapt to new forms of everyday life, and find ways to deal with unprecedented problems.

In Colombia, resilience is in our DNA and we have an unwavering determination to get our country through this. This is why I invite you to see the pandemic as an opportunity for us to learn from each other, so that we can take on the collective challenge of moving forward as a better society.

We have responded to this situation with solidarity, appreciating what we have achieved, and with the certainty that we have the strength to overcome the difficulties we face.

In Colombia, we were quick to tackle the crisis, acting in phases, based on reliable information, with the assistance of experts and scientists. I would like to thank PAHO/WHO for its participation throughout this ongoing process. Dr. Tedros, thank you; Dr. Carissa, thank you; Dr. Jarbas Barbosa, thank you; and of course, thanks too, to Dr. Gina Tambini, a great friend who represents PAHO/WHO in our country. You have been our allies as we face these difficult times.

Relying on science, data, expert knowledge, and confidence in our ability to move forward amid the difficulties, we have worked in three fundamental areas.

First, to protect the health of Colombians no matter where they are, acting in particular to ensure that the most vulnerable can advance and have access to health.

Second, to protect the social fabric and prevent the loss of all the achievements made over decades to overcome poverty and continue on the path towards achieving equity.

And third, to develop tools to reactivate our productive capacity so that, despite COVID-19, Colombia is a country of opportunity where, after this situation is over, we continue to have paths to achieving our dreams.

In the first area, protecting health, we have learned a lot and we are also proud to have been the first country in Latin America certified for detection of the coronavirus. This demonstrates our ability to react to this kind of emergency and, above all, the quality of our immunologists.

When the crisis began, we had only one laboratory that was able to process about 1,000 tests a day. Today, we now have more than 100 public and private laboratories, with the capacity to process more than 36,000 tests a day.

And thanks to an ambitious expansion plan, we went from having just over 5,400 intensive care beds to more than 10,400 today. Soon, we will have more than 11,000 and it will be a milestone in the history of our country's hospitals to have more than doubled our capacity in less than 5 months.

Human talent in health has been fundamental and always will be. Hundreds, tens of thousands of professionals, technicians, and specialists were trained through free virtual courses. More than 47,000 people have been trained specifically in intensive care, with the support of the health sector and academia.

We also created the emergency mitigation fund known as FOME, and with it a national strategic reserve with millions of pieces of personal protective equipment that we are distributing throughout the country.

In this effort, there has been coordination between the public and private sectors, as well as national and local authorities.

As a government, we have responded responsibly in our commitment to society, strengthening the social fabric. Accordingly, we are moving ahead with the intention of leaving no one behind.

We have implemented social measures to protect vulnerable people in nearly 10 million families, with an investment of nearly 11 percent of national GDP.

We have designed and implemented new models of equity; and nearly 3 million families who were not part of any government program have benefitted from an unconditional cash transfer program called the Solidarity Income. And through a value added tax (VAT) compensation scheme, benefits are provided to nearly one million of the most vulnerable families in our society.

Our government does not believe there is a dilemma between choosing health or economic development. For us, the equation is simple: Without health there can be no development and without development there can be no sustainable health system.

We were hopeful from day one and, with the future in mind, we designed a reactivation plan that we call our Commitment to the Future of Colombia, aimed at mitigating the impacts of COVID-19 on productive activities and laying the groundwork for a rapid, sustainable, and socially conscious economic recovery with a cross-cutting focus on strengthening public health.

We know the pandemic isn't going to end soon, just as we know we're only going to make it through if we are all in this together. This is the time to offer the best version of ourselves, without reserve. We have made a clear commitment to doing that in Colombia.

Thank you very much.

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