



Organización
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**OPENING REMARKS BY THE HON. MR. LUIS ALMAGRO LEMES,
SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE ORGANIZATION OF AMERICAN STATES**

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**59th Directing Council of PAHO
73rd session of the WHO Regional Committee for the Americas**

Friends,

We would like to commend the work of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) and its Directing Council at this trying time for health in the Americas.

We also want to express our appreciation to all healthcare workers in the Hemisphere for their dedication, service, and sacrifice. You have shown yourselves to be up to the task of dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic on the front lines.

PAHO has been instrumental in guiding and assisting health authorities, who have worked tirelessly to deal with this emergency. Standing out in this titanic work is the leadership of our friend Carissa Etienne and her entire team.

Since the start of the pandemic, you have provided reports to the Permanent Council of the Organization of American States (OAS) concerning the spread of the virus, the impact on our Region, the progress achieved, and the gaps in access to vaccines.

The numbers continue to be disturbing: more than 85 million confirmed cases and more than 2,100,000 deaths from the virus.

The Americas have borne a disproportionate weight, and are at present the most affected region in the world, accounting for more than 38 percent of deaths. The pandemic has also shined a light on our record as the most unequal region in the world.

It has highlighted the Region's enormous structural and social inequalities that are deeply rooted and endemic to our societies.

Unfortunately, we suffer from weak social protection structures, fragmented and overwhelmed health systems, poverty, discrimination, and exclusion. This situation in turn causes huge gaps in access to the economic, social, cultural, and political rights of our peoples.

Despite the good news about vaccination, we are alarmed that some 75 percent of the population of Latin America and the Caribbean still are not fully vaccinated, as PAHO recently warned.

The equitable distribution of vaccines in the Region must be an absolute priority, and should be the subject of discussion in our political forum. We must continue to promote efforts to address the challenges posed by the unequal access to vaccines.

We must not emerge from this situation with even greater inequality, and with people having fewer rights. On the contrary, it should be an opportunity for progress and shared well-being, for more rights for more people.

Let us use this challenging time to reinforce the values that we believe are indispensable to life and human development, and ensure that those who are most excluded in our societies are not left behind for one more minute.

Let me emphasize the unwavering commitment of the OAS to advancing the right to health in the Region, and to taking a proactive role in implementing our mandates to achieve this important objective.

Our political forum will continue to be a space for open and frank dialogue, so that the OAS, PAHO, the Inter-American Development Bank, member countries, and all concerned stakeholders have an important platform to discuss and exchange ideas, and to propose solutions for developing public, inclusive, and comprehensive policies.

We will continue to do our part, together with PAHO, to promote solidarity, equality, and inclusion through joint and strategic action, in order to protect the most vulnerable among us and ensure a safe and healthy future for all.
