

**Connect Americas Summit
Panamá City, Panama
17-19 July 2012
Opening Ceremony
18 July 2012**

**ADDRESS BY
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Excellencies,

Distinguished Guests,

Member of the media

Ladies and Gentlemen

At the outset, I wish to apologise for the absence of my Prime Minister, the Honourable Tillman Thomas, who has Lead responsibility for Science and Technology (including ICT) in the CARICOM quasi-cabinet.

Prime Minister Thomas greatly desired to be here with us today but unfortunately, other pressing matters of state prevailed upon him. He has therefore afforded me the privilege of making this statement on his behalf.

I also wish to place on record, on behalf of all our caricom member states, our profound gratitude to the President of Panama, His Excellency Ricardo Martinelli and the Government and people of Panama for hosting us for this conference and for the splendid arrangements they have made for our stay in beautiful Panama City.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I would like to thank the ITU and in particular the Secretary General, Dr. Hamadoun Toure, for delivering on his promise to bring this Summit to the Americas in 2012.

Ten years ago, the prospect of a connected world was nothing but a figment of our imaginations. While we could all see the internal logic of such a goal and the enormous benefits such an approach to treating with our World could generate, we did not see it as a possibility within our reach. However, thanks to the determined efforts and commitment of Secretary General Toure and his dedicated team Connect America is now within our reach.

Ladies and Gentlemen, like every other Region, the CARICOM Region is working assiduously to

improve the livelihood and well-being of all the people of the Region.

We understand that part of that well-being includes finding ways of getting our unconnected people connected and becoming a part of the living Digital economy of the 21st century. Part of that well-being also means ensuring that our children have the maximum protection online. In this regard, the CARICOM region voices its full support for the ITU's "Child Online Protection" initiative.

The CARICOM Region is represented here today because all the member countries recognize that the use of ICT and connectivity has become a vital indicator and driver of social and economic growth.

In some respects, this Summit serves as an endorsement of some of our regional initiatives undertaken in relation to Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and resonates strongly with the work we do as a region with regard to deepening the integration movement. Indeed, this summit mirrors our commitment to create the CARICOM Single Market and Economy.

Over the last ten years the Region has been working hard at policy development and multiple activities towards developing and maturing our ICT landscape. Most recently, the CARICOM Region has approved a number of ICT-related Legislation which will be reduced into National law and a Regional Digital Development Strategy (RDDS). There are also many supporting regional strategies and policies which support and bolster the Region's strides into the Digital economy. These plans include: a Regional E-Government Strategy, Trade-in-Services Action Plan, Small Business Development Plans, Youth Development, Cultural Industries Work Plan and a Draft Economic Development Plan.

These regional plans are founded upon National Development strategies in all the countries of the CARICOM Region. All of these strategies have strong ICT components targeted at developing and supporting people to lead more productive lives.

At the same time, this Summit provides another opportunity for action since these strategies, policies and plans need to be given life. In developing them, we have identified goals, targets and actions to bridge the manifest gap with global and international benchmarks.

Moreover, this Summit gives our region the opportunity to speak with "One Voice" with regard to ICT development in our Region – an opportunity which is of importance to all of the countries and peoples of CARICOM.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the importance of human capacity building for our Region and indeed for the world cannot be underscored. The digital content which will be produced by these newly skilled human beings demands sustained, higher internet capacity and penetration and fast broadband connectivity – which is now considered a major component and enabler for socio-economic development. This, ladies and Gentlemen, cannot be ignored.

You will note that the CARICOM region has proposed many projects under the Summit Themes including Digital Inclusion. The projects support key initiatives and priorities in our countries and region such as :

- Broadband roll-out , adoption and usage;
- Development of key Applications to ensure that we receive maximum return-on -our investment in Broadband;
- Using and managing our spectrum as a key regional asset;
- Capitalizing on our Broadband, Spectrum and other ICT inputs to develop a Single ICT space for the Region;
- Continued strengthening our legal & regulatory environment;

- Developing a market intelligence and knowledge management base to better inform our regional business decisions;
- Development of Digital cities and societies, bolstering our research and education network (C@ribNET) University capabilities and outreach and offering much more opportunity for human capacity development; and last but by no means least
- Applications and services which help us to manage and mitigate climate change issues, disasters and other emergencies.

Ladies and Gentlemen, these projects are proposed with purpose. We have long-term, strategic, people-centred plans for our Region- which we want to see come alive in this century – sooner rather than later for the vitalization of the Region.

Programmes and projects cannot come alive without investment. This is perhaps the single most important reason for our presence at this Summit and other international initiatives of this nature. **The CARICOM region is open for business-** the business of making our region a viable part of the world; the business of ensuring that all of our people have the skills to be productive citizens in the new Digital world. **That world, of necessity must be a connected world.**

Ladies and Gentlemen, Developing countries such as ours cannot stress enough the need for adequate , sustained funding to ensure our growth and development into viable information and knowledge societies. Today, I make a strong appeal for renewed funding opportunities for our region so that we do not remain on the wrong side of the digital divide.

I do not think any of us wish to leave Panama City this week knowing that a significant portion of the world could remain virtually unconnected. The presence here of potential investors is extremely important and encouraging to us. We therefore wish thank you, investors, for taking the time to join with us at this Summit of hope for the Americas.

Our Regional organisations led by the CARICOM Secretariat and the Caribbean Telecommunications Union(CTU) are ready to meet the challenges of implementing these projects in a three (3) to five (5) year period starting January 1, 2013.

Over the course of the next two days – you will hear from CARICOM Speakers – on issues which support our “One Voice” approach for the continued relevance of the CARICOM Region as a vital part of the Americas (and the world).

Last week at our annual working Meeting – Heads of Government of CARICOM met in Saint Lucia, one of the items on our Agenda was this Summit. In the Course of those deliberations –we added our “One Voice’ to the Summit discourse by re-iterating that ICT continues to be a key priority of the CARICOM Region. The Support of fellow CARICOM Heads of Government for this Summit is strong and our expectations are high. Let us honour the high level support and political will engendered by this Summit - by ensuring that when we leave here on Thursday, we have pushed our hardest for workable, practical solutions to the social and economic problems of the Caribbean Region and the whole of the Americas.

Let us develop strong partnerships to treat with those problems, so that when history reflects on this Summit, it will find that we did our utmost to contribute to the development of a strong, economically viable, capable people coming together to form a connected world Community .

I thank you