

Organization of American States
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THE VICE PRESIDENT: Ambassador Gonzalez, Secretary General Almagro, Ambassador Trujillo, permanent representatives, distinguished members of Congress, ambassadors, all of our honored guests, it is my great honor to be here in the House of the Americas to address this session of the Organization of American States. Thank you for the honor of being with you today. (Applause.)

And I bring greetings first and foremost from a great champion of security, prosperity, and freedom in the Western Hemisphere. I bring greetings from the 45th President of the United States of America, President Donald Trump. (Applause.)

I'm here today because the Western Hemisphere is a key priority of our administration and our country. Under President Trump, the United States will always put the security and prosperity of America first. But America first does not mean America alone.

Our nation has always cared deeply about our neighbors across the Western Hemisphere. This region is filled with diverse cultures, distinctive traditions, and unique identities beyond number, but we are all bound together by geography, by history, and by the enduring aspiration for freedom.

Ours was always meant to be a hemisphere of freedom, and that vision is why the Organization of American States exists.

One week ago today, this body celebrated the 70th anniversary of its founding, when 21 nations from across the Western Hemisphere declared to the world, and I quote, "that the historic mission of America is to offer a land of liberty." And that vision endures to this very day.

Today, this institution essentially represents our entire Western Hemisphere. And the United States is proud — proud to stand with the OAS. And we're especially grateful for the principled leadership of Secretary General Almagro. Thank you for your outstanding words today.

As President Trump has said, the United States seeks "a future [in our hemisphere] where," in his words, "the people of each country can live out their dreams." And since the first day of our administration, we have worked with our allies and partners across the region in pursuit of our shared goals.

Last year, the United States and Mexico co-hosted the inaugural Conference on Prosperity and Security in Central America, and it was my privilege to address that gathering. I also had the privilege to travel to Colombia, Argentina, Chile, and Panama, to forge stronger ties across the region.

And just last month, it was my honor to represent the United States at the 8th Summit of the Americas in Peru — where, on President Trump’s behalf, I called on the free nations of the Western Hemisphere to confront our shared challenges, seize our shared opportunities, and embrace our shared future of prosperity and freedom together.

The United States has already taken crucial steps to achieve this vision. When it comes to prosperity, President Trump has taken decisive action to unleash our economy as never before. As I stand before you today, over the last 15 months, we’ve been rolling back burdensome regulations in record numbers, we’ve been unleashing our boundless natural resources, and we enacted the largest tax cuts and tax reform in American history.

The results have been a more prosperous America. Businesses large and small have created more than 3.1 million new jobs already. Unemployment in our country is at a 17-year low. And for Hispanics, I’m pleased to report that unemployment has never been lower in the United States. And companies are announcing hundreds of billions of dollars in investments in our economy and in our workers. We’ve made extraordinary progress in reviving the American economy, which benefits all the nations across the Americas.

The OAS charter says, and I quote, “Economic cooperation is essential to [our] common welfare,” and it is. And I’m pleased to report that the United States is the number one trading partner in the Western Hemisphere, and we are by far the single largest source of foreign direct investment in the region as a whole. In fact, this nation trades nearly three times as much with our neighbors in the Western Hemisphere as we do with China.

Today, we have a tremendous opportunity to forge even stronger trade relationships that are, in President Trump’s words, “free, fair, and reciprocal.” And after years of talk, our administration is focused on action and results in improving our economic relationships across the Americas.

Over the past year, we have successfully expanded access for vital agricultural products in Colombia and in Argentina. We are also strengthening our energy and infrastructure partnerships in Chile, Brazil, and across the region. And as we speak, the United States is working with Canada and Mexico very closely to modernize the North American Free Trade Agreement and ensure that it holds to that deal’s original spirit.

Let me thank the many countries that have demonstrated courage to pursue economic reforms to empower job creators, innovators, and citizens alike — from Argentina to Jamaica to many others. President Trump and I welcome your bold actions, and we look forward to expanding our ties of commerce and exchange for generations to come.

But as we strive to expand opportunity for our citizens, we all never will forget that security is the foundation of our prosperity. And under President Donald Trump, the United States has remained committed to work with our allies and partners to ensure the safety and security of our people across our hemisphere.

Since its inception, the OAS has played a central role in strengthening security partnerships across the wider region, and that's still true today. At this very hour, there are many dangers spread across our region, and our citizens see them, in one form or another, every single day.

We see the gangs and syndicates that plague our cities and towns, bringing crime and sowing fear in our communities. We see the illegal drugs that poison our children, tear apart our families, and cut short too many lives of promise.

And at our borders, we see the threat of hardened criminals, human traffickers, drug traffickers, and even radical terrorists.

The United States, with the strong partnership of many of your nations, refuses entry to seven known or suspected terrorists every single day. Think about that. We disrupt the attempted transit of 50 known or suspected terrorists attempting to enter our country every week. That's more than 2,500 every year.

Now more than ever, for all these reasons, our security cooperation is vital to the security of our hemisphere. And President Trump has no higher priority than the safety and security of the American people. Under his leadership, we have brought new resources, tools, and the right people at every level of American security.

And that's why it's crucial, as I gather before you today, to note that it's crucial that the United States Senate confirm President Trump's nominee to be Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, Gina Haspel.

Gina Haspel — who I've come to know personally — is a leader of unparalleled experience in the Central Intelligence Agency. She's dedicated her life to protecting our nation. And when confirmed, Gina Haspel will be the first director to have spent her career serving in the CIA, and she's be the first woman to fill that critical position. She has the confidence of the President and our entire team. And as the President said earlier today, she's not only a highly respected nominee but she is among the most qualified that will ever serve in that role.

Sadly, some are still playing politics with her nomination, even though her bipartisan support has been overwhelming. As I speak to you today, Gina Haspel enjoys the support of former CIA directors from past administrations representing both political parties, including Leon Panetta, John Brennan, and Michael Hayden. And today, we call on the United States Senate to put the safety and security of the American people first and confirm Gina Haspel as Director of the Central Intelligence Agency as soon as possible.

In addition to our strong leadership and strong collaboration with other nations, I'm pleased to report the United States has also been taking action to advance our security and to support the security across this region. We've been securing our borders, enforcing our laws, removing dangerous gang members, and drug dealers, and violent criminals from our streets at a rate never seen before.

Last year alone, our administration, through the Justice Department, arrested nearly twice as many members of the vicious MS-13 gang as the year before. And as we speak, our law enforcement at every level are working to stamp out that menace once and for all. We've also taken significant steps to strengthen our partnerships with nations like yours all across the wider region.

Our efforts include the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative, working to stop the flow of drugs, expanded security collaboration with Mexico, and security partnerships with a wide array of Central American countries to fight organized crime. We'll also continue to deepen our security relationships across South America, especially to stop the cultivation and commerce of illegal drugs.

But of all the security threats facing our region, one is more insidious than all the rest — and that's, ultimately, the cancer of corruption.

The nations represented here know all too well: Corruption emboldens vicious criminals; endangers public safety. Corruption corrodes the foundations of democracy; it undermines trust in government. And as corruption grows, freedom and prosperity wither.

Last month, in an act of undivided consensus not seen in more than a decade, every nation at the Summit of the Americas endorsed the Lima Commitment on "Democratic Governance Against Corruption." We believe this was an important statement and sent a powerful message that the free nations of the Western Hemisphere are united in our commitment to cut out corruption from our midst. And I can assure you the United States will continue to work with our allies and partners to advance this critical cause.

And so too will we work in new and renewed ways to promote democracy across the Hemisphere, for the greatest corruption of all is when the people lose their voice, their

vote, and their God-given freedom, and when representative government gives way to dictatorship and despotism.

The Charter of the OAS declares that — and I quote: “Representative democracy is an indispensable condition for... stability, peace and development.” And every day, the free nations of our hemisphere prove the truth in this statement anew.

This year, citizens across the wider region will vote to choose their leaders and chart their future, from Colombia to Brazil to the United States and other nations.

Yet even as we celebrate this exercise in freedom, the dark cloud of tyranny still hangs heavy over too many of our neighbors in this hemisphere.

In Cuba, the longest-surviving dictatorship in the Western Hemisphere still clings to power. For nearly 60 years, the Castro family systematically sapped the wealth of a great nation and of the Cuban people. While the Castro name is now fading, the oppression and police state they imposed is as powerful as ever.

Today, the United States once again stands with the Cuban people in their stand for freedom. No longer will our dollars fund Cuba’s military, security, and intelligence services — the core of that regime. And in this administration, we will stand and we will always say, “Que Viva Cuba Libre.” (Applause.)

But Cuba’s leaders have never been content to stifle just their own people’s freedom. For generations, that communist regime has sought to export its failed ideology across the wider region. And today, the seeds of Cuban tyranny are bearing fruit in Nicaragua and Venezuela.

In Nicaragua, hundreds of thousands have taken to the streets to show their anger at their aging socialist leader, and their demand to return to democratic order. But the repressive Ortega government has responded with deadly force, killing dozens of peaceful protestors and closing down independent media outlets that dared to cover their deadly actions.

The United States condemns these brutal actions in the strongest possible terms. We call on the Ortega government to allow the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights into Nicaragua. And we join with nations around the world in demanding that the Ortega government respond to the Nicaraguan people’s demands for democratic reform and hold accountable those responsible for violence. The people of Nicaragua deserve better than the worsening repression of Daniel Ortega’s government. (Applause.)

Yet more than any other nation in our hemisphere, in Venezuela, the tragedy of tyranny is on full display. And the blame can be laid squarely at the feet of one man: Nicolás Maduro.

Maduro promised his people he would restore prosperity, but delivered only deeper poverty. He promised them safety and security, but Venezuela is now riven with chaos and rampant crime. Maduro promised the people of Venezuela renewed greatness, but he has only brought that nation suffering.

As this body knows well, Venezuela was once one of our hemisphere's richest nations. It is now astoundingly one of the poorest. At this very moment, nearly 9 out of 10 Venezuelans live in crushing poverty. Opportunity has evaporated, with an economy that's already shrunk by half, and is still growing smaller with every passing day.

Venezuela's grocery stores are all but empty, with food and daily necessities nearly impossible to find. Hospitals lack the most basic medical supplies. And in the last year alone, the infant mortality rate in Venezuela jumped 30 percent, and maternal mortality rates skyrocketed by 66 percent.

And every day, some 5,000 Venezuelans flee from their homeland. It's the largest cross-border mass exodus in the history of the Western Hemisphere.

I've actually had the opportunity to meet some of the families impacted by this exodus and swept up in it.

Last summer, in Cartagena, Colombia, a Venezuelan grandmother told my wife and I about how Venezuelan children would have to rise at four in the morning in her village to get a ticket that they could exchange late in the afternoon for a single piece of bread. She had rescued her grandchildren only the week before we had met. But most haven't been so fortunate.

In the last month, in Lima, I met four courageous leaders of the Venezuelan opposition — two of whom I'm told are actually here today — Julio Borges, Carlos Vecchio, David Smolansky, and Antonio Ledezma. These four men are great defenders of democracy in their homeland, and they have our respect. (Applause.)

Having taken a stand for freedom in their homeland, they were forced to flee the regime's wrath, but they described to me — they described to me, in painstaking detail, how Maduro has systematically corrupted the upcoming election and how he's replaced that nation's once-great democracy with dictatorship.

The truth is, the Venezuelan people would choose a better path if they could. But under Nicolás Maduro, they will never have that chance.

The so-called elections in Venezuela, scheduled for May the 20th, will be nothing more than a fraud and a sham. The Maduro regime has already stacked the Venezuelan courts and Electoral Council with its cronies. It's banned major parties. It's barred opposition leaders from standing for office, and stifled a free press, and jailed its political enemies, including more than 12,000 politically motivated detentions.

On Election Day itself, the Maduro regime has already given every indication that it will resort to its standard authoritarian playbook: manipulate voting data, change polling places at the last possible minute, and engage in widespread intimidation, and even violence.

In short, there will be no real election in Venezuela on May 20th, and the world knows it. It will be a fake election, with a fake outcome. Maduro and his acolytes have already ensured that their reign of corruption, crime, narco-trafficking, and terror will continue.

And that's why today we call on Maduro and regime: Suspend this sham election. Hold real elections. Give the people of Venezuela real choices because the Venezuelan people deserve to live in democracy once again. (Applause.)

With every day, Venezuela becomes even more of a failed state. And we do well to remember, failed states know no borders.

Venezuela's collapse is already affecting economies across the region. It's spreading infectious diseases that were once eradicated in our hemisphere. It's giving drug traffickers and transnational criminal organizations new opportunities to endanger our people. And as Venezuela continues to collapse, the consequences will radiate across the wider hemisphere, affecting all of our countries.

President Trump has made it clear: The United States will not idly stand by as Venezuela crumbles. (Applause.) We have already imposed strict financial sanctions on more than 50 current and former senior Venezuelan officials, and we cut off the so-called "Petro" from the United States' financial system.

And today, I am pleased to announce that the United States is designating three Venezuelans with direct ties to the Maduro regime as narcotics "kingpins." We have frozen their assets, blocked their access to our nation, so they can no longer poison our people with their deadly drugs. (Applause.)

We've also been demonstrating the heart of the American people. The United States is also providing \$2.5 million to help meet the needs of vulnerable Venezuelans now living in Colombia. And last month, in Lima, it was my privilege to announce that our nation will devote nearly \$16 million across the wider region to support Venezuelans who have fled the tyranny of their homeland.

To be clear, the United States, along with so many of you, stands ready to do more — much more — to directly support the Venezuelan people. But once again, as in the case of democracy, when it comes to humanitarian aid to the suffering people of Venezuela, one man stands in the way.

For months, Nicolás Maduro has refused to allow humanitarian assistance into Venezuela. He actually claims that there's no humanitarian crisis, even as his country collapses into poverty all around him.

So today, we say to Nicolás Maduro and his entire regime: The time has come to open Venezuela to international aid, and do it now. (Applause.) Every day you don't — every day you don't is another day innocent people starve and die — men, women, and children — and millions flee your country for a better life.

Allow me to take a moment to thank the many nations here that have already taken action to shelter and assist the Venezuelan people. Let me also thank all those who have stepped up to rebuke and isolate the dictator Maduro and all the members of his regime.

Over the past year, many of your nations have already taken a variety of praiseworthy steps to send a message to Maduro. Last month, at the Summit of the Americas, we were pleased to see 15 nations join with the United States to declare that Venezuela's upcoming elections lack credibility and legitimacy, and to demand that Maduro hold a real election that is free, fair, and transparent. This declaration in Lima, Peru was in keeping with the best traditions of this hemisphere of freedom, and I commend every nation that signed on.

And on the world stage, just last week, the International Monetary Fund censured Venezuela for its repeated failure to meet treaty obligations and its lack of economic transparency. This is one more sign of a growing international consensus that the Maduro regime must be held accountable, and we'll continue to bring more pressure in the future.

But all these steps are not enough. We believe it is time to do more — much more. Every free nation gathered here must take stronger action to stand with the Venezuelan people and stand up to their oppressors.

Today, on behalf of President Trump and the people of the United States, I call on all of our freedom-loving neighbors in this hemisphere to take three concrete actions:

The time has come first and foremost to cut off Venezuela's corrupt leaders from laundering money through your financial systems.

Secondly, the time has come to enact visa restrictions that prevent Venezuela's leaders from entering your nations.

And finally, we call on all freedom-loving nations across our hemisphere to hold Maduro accountable for destroying Venezuela's democracy.

This leadership, exemplified by the Secretary General and by so many of the leaders gathered here is essential to achieving the objective of restoring democracy for the good people of Venezuela, and we encourage you, with great respect, to consider these actions and to do them quickly.

We've all signed the Inter-American Democratic Charter, which declares, and I quote, "the peoples of the Americas have a right to democracy... and their governments have an obligation to promote and defend [democracy]."

Venezuela has repudiated this promise, men and women. And the proof is playing out before our very eyes. So today, on behalf of the United States of America, we call on the members of this institution to uphold our long-standing commitment to democracy and freedom. We call on members of the OAS to suspend Venezuela from the Organization of American States. (Applause.) This is an institution dedicated to democracy.

We must do this because, as President Trump has said, a "stable and peaceful Venezuela is in the best interest of our entire hemisphere." But most importantly, we must do this just because it's right. The people of Venezuela deserve democracy. They deserve this institution — all of their neighbors to live up to our word — a word we gave one another some 70 years ago. The people of Venezuela deserve to regain their libertad.

And as I close, let me thank you all for the honor of addressing you. And also to close with confidence because I believe the day will come, as Simón Bolívar declared, the day will come when "A people that loves freedom will in the end be free." Venezuela will be a free and democratic nation once again. (Applause.)

Men and women of the OAS, all the nations gathered here, we live in the New World. And the New World was always destined to be a hemisphere of freedom. Freedom has always given our nations purpose. It's always bound our peoples together in common cause. And freedom will always be our source of strength in this New World and the surest foundation for the brighter future. That's always been true before. And in this New World, it will always be true in the future.

You know, moments ago, I stood within the Hall of Heroes. I marveled at the great leaders of liberty who are immortalized there. In the long annals of our shared history,

names like Bolívar, San Martín, Martí, stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln. And we gather here today, inspired by their courage and their sacrifice.

And we also gather here today, I hope, determined to live up to their example; to be willing to do in our time, for freedom, what they were prepared to do in theirs; and prove ourselves worthy of the freedom they secured.

Today, let us rededicate ourselves to our most cherished ideal. And let us have faith — faith that as we undergo this journey, we never go alone. The truth is, liberty is not our cause alone. I truly believe with all my heart, as the Bible says, “where the spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.”

And so when we fight for freedom, we make His cause on this Earth our own. And with the courage of our citizens, with the conviction of our leaders, with the strong leadership of President Donald Trump, and the partnership represented here at the OAS, and with God’s help, I know this New World will someday soon finally and fully become the hemisphere of freedom it was always destined to be.

So thank you. God bless you. God bless all the nations represented here. And God bless the United States of America. (Applause.)

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