FIRST LADY HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON
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Thank you, Mrs. Wasmosy. I think I speak for all of us in thanking you for such an inspiring opening to our gathering last evening.

As we begin our working session on children's health and education, I want to reiterate what I said last night. During this conference, we will learn from each other and find new inspiration as we work on behalf of women and children throughout the hemisphere

At the Summit of the Americas, our leaders committed our nations to ongoing collaboration and open economic and democratic development. The Summit recognized the central role of investing in human resources in all dimensions of social, democratic, political and economic development. This historic Summit set forth an agenda to promote prosperity and democracy throughout the region by implementing trade initiatives, sustainable development and more effective government. The declaration our leaders signed included specific commitments in the areas of health and education.

At the same time, we came together for a one-day symposium to review the status of health and education of children in the Hemisphere, shared ideas of how we were addressing the major issues facing our children, and reached a general understanding of future challenges. We recognized that we have common needs in the region but we also recognized that progress has been made. We agreed that investment in human capital is vital to the broader goal of eradicating poverty and discrimination.

As a follow-up to the Summit, Mrs. Wasmosy and I sent each of you a letter earlier this year in which we proposed a three-point agenda to advance the health and education goals adopted by the leaders at the Summit of the Americas.

Elimination of Measles

The first initiative we proposed is the elimination of measles in the Americas by the year 2000.

I was very proud to be invited by Dr. George Alleyne, director of the Pan American Health Organization, to launch the measles elimination campaign in the Americas. Many of you have joined in launching measles initiatives in your own countries. And today we will join Mrs. Wasmosy as she begins a measles campaign here in Paraguay.

A regional plan of action that outlines the strategies and technical components to achieve elimination of measles has been prepared and funding is being sought to complement support already received. While some countries are still waiting for international support, they have already demonstrated their commitment to that effort. This has translated into further control of the disease, which was at its lowest level ever in the period between 1994 and 1995.

The United States has been a proud partner of past efforts to eliminate major childhood diseases in the hemisphere. Through the United States Agency for International Development, the United States plans to enter into a grant with PAHO to advance hemispheric health care priorities. Although the United States, like many other countries, is operating under severe budget constraints, our government is hoping to allocate $8 million under this new agreement. The funding would go directly to the Regional Expanded Program on Immunization, which includes support for the measles elimination campaign in our region.

Reduction of maternal mortality

The second critical initiative that we proposed for follow-up was the reduction of maternal mortality in the Americas, an issue we cannot separate from the well-being of our children.

One hundred million women cannot obtain or are not using family

services because they are poor, uneducated or lack access to care. Twenty million of these women will seek unsafe abortions -- some will die, some will be disabled for life. A growing number of unwanted pregnancies are occurring among young women, barely beyond childhood themselves.

Most of these maternal deaths could have been prevented with basic primary, reproductive and emergency obstetric health care. In some cases, there are 175,000 motherless children for every one million families. Many of these children don´t survive. Of those who do, many are recruited into a life of exploitation on the streets of our world´s cities, subjected daily to abuse, indignity, disease, and the specter of early death.

There must be a renewed commitment to improving maternal health. The World Health Organization launched in 1987 a Safe Motherhood Initiative to halve maternal mortality by the year 2000. In Miami, the leaders of our hemisphere committed their governments to this same goal. To reach these important goals, more attention must be paid to emergency medical care, as well as primary pre-natal care. Providing emergency obstetric care is a relatively cheap way of saving lives -- and along with family planning services is among the most cost-effective interventions in even the poorest of countries.

There has been progress, but many deficiencies exist. Maternal mortality rates in the Americas are still unacceptably high and progress in meeting the set targets has been extremely slow. We have the technologies and the national plans in place to end the conditions under which women continue to die from preventable diseases. There is no justification for the wide differences that we find country by country in the hemisphere in maternal mortality indicators. We need to encourage each other to give the necessary priority to reduce the disparities and assign necessary resources to implement national plans for maternal mortality reduction.

Education Reform

The third area we called to your attention in our letter is investing in

girls education in the context of improving overall quality of education. Nothing is more important to the region´s future economic and social development than the education of its children. One of the Summit goals is to achieve a primary education completion rate of 100% and a secondary enrollment rate by the year 2010.

Over the past three decades, Latin America and the Caribbean have had a remarkable record of achievement in human development. A great distance still exists between our current knowledge and the quality of education services provided.

Because of the critical nature of education, an initiative was created at the Summit of the Americas to provide an ongoing consultative forum for governments, nongovernmental organizations, the business community, and international organizations of the Hemisphere to share experiences in education reform and showcase innovations in the hemisphere.

Today, I am pleased to formally launch the Partnership for Education Revitalization in the Americas (PERA) by pledging a commitment by the United States of 3.7 million dollars over 5 years which constitutes initial funding. As called for by the Plan of Action of the Summit of the Americas, PERA was created as a sustainable hemispheric partnership to promote the adoption and implementation of effective education policies. This initiative will institutionalize across the hemisphere the capacity to support and facilitate collaborative efforts to improve basic education opportunities for all children, including special emphasis on increased access to girls and women in those countries where this is still an issue.

Through PERA, countries will increase their knowledge of policy alternatives and successful practices for improving educational quality, efficiency and equity throughout the region leading to improved policies on human resources. It will create a broad membership representative of the key stakeholders in policy formulation and implementation and build a consensus on critical educational policy issues.

We have a unique opportunity to impact on the Summit targets. Because of our roles in our societies, we are in a privileged position to bring attention to these issues and help build upon approaches that are working. We can forge partnerships among governmental and nongovernmental organizations all aimed at meeting the same goals.