

Plenary Conference of First Ladies
of State Governments of the America
12/4/96

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PRESERVATION

As delivered

**FIRST LADY HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON
REMARKS FOR THE PLENARY OF THE SIXTH CONFERENCE OF
FIRST LADIES OF HEADS OF STATE AND GOVERNMENTS OF THE AMERICAS
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I know we all join in expressing our appreciation to everyone who has had anything to do in putting on this Conference and the inaugural ceremony and reception last night. Over the next several days, this conference will work on an ambitious agenda that builds on our work in Paraguay last year and focuses on challenges facing women and children of the Americas on the eve of a new century.

This year's conference allows us the opportunity to measure the progress achieved since Miami and to focus on concrete ways to advance this agenda for sustainable development.

Let me report on three areas of concern that were discussed in Miami and Asuncion: the elimination of measles from our hemisphere, education reform, and reducing the rate of maternal mortality.

First, we can all be encouraged by the Pan American Health Organization's report on measles, which shows a 63 per cent reduction of confirmed cases of measles since 1995 and a 99 per cent decrease since 1990. These statistics are evidence of how close we are coming to the goal of eliminating measles from the Western hemisphere by the year 2000. Such progress was possible as we have already heard because of the efforts of many of the people in this room to raise awareness in your own countries and to launch regional Pan American Health Organization campaigns across the hemisphere.

A year ago, I pledged that the United States government would support these efforts. On June 27, the United States Agency for International Development signed an \$8 million regional grant with PAHO to help achieve the measles elimination goal. Over the next several years, USAID's missions around the Hemisphere will make their own contributions to the measles campaign.

Our second concern was to promote education reform so that by 2010 every school-age child in our hemisphere would have completed a primary education.

While we all recognize that education is a gateway to our individual and collective progress and prosperity, our region continues to lag far behind countries with comparable GDPs in the percentage of children who complete primary school. In the Western Hemisphere, barely half of the children entering primary school complete the sixth grade. Girls from indigenous and minority communities, including in my own country, are least likely to secure the education they need.

And we must be a voice for change on this critical issue.

Last year I spoke about PERA, the new Partnership for Education Revitalization in the Americas. Based on commitments made by our nations in Miami, PERA will create networks that allow for the exchange of information on programs and policies that have been successful in expanding educational opportunities. I am pleased that the United States' contribution of \$3.7 million over five years launched this initiative. The United States has now made an additional commitment to nearly double that contribution over the next five years.

Other steps are underway. The Inter-American Dialogue, perhaps the premier private center of analysis and exchange on hemispheric affairs, has agreed to serve as the PERA secretariat. Their members include some of the hemisphere's most prominent citizens. With us today is Peter Hakim, President of the InterAmerican Dialogue. He will be available during the education working group sessions to answer questions and explain further how this partnership will work.

Mr. Hakim and the Dialogue will work closely with the Government of Mexico, which volunteered as part of the follow-up to the Miami Summit to coordinate initiatives on education.

National education teams already are promoting educational reform efforts in six countries--Brazil, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Peru and Nicaragua. Two others, Venezuela and Ecuador, recently joined this group. PERA will focus on issues of decentralization, school finance, quality and equity and will be available to support education reform teams throughout the region.

There are encouraging signs of progress: New and exciting bilingual programs in Guatemala and Bolivia; the EDUCO programs in El Salvador and the Dominican Republic; preschool programs in Costa Rica and Jamaica. PERA will compile the best and most successful cases of education reform so that we can learn from each other's experiences.

Promoting education reform is critical to strengthening democratic institutions and values throughout the Americas. Democracy cannot thrive or survive without educated citizens; and in a fast-paced, highly competitive global economy, an educated populace is vital to every nation and every region's economic growth. That is why the commitment to universal primary education made in Miami is so important.

Let me also add that girls must be part of any education equation. Girls must not be left on the margins, consigned to lives of poverty and ignorance. It does them no good. It does their families no good. It does their nations no good. Educating girls is the best single investment we can make if we care about building strong democracies with vibrant free market economies.

I am also heartened that civic education is on the agenda of this conference. Teaching people -- especially women and girls -- about democratic values and the importance of their participation in

the political process is critical to sustaining democracy across our hemisphere and giving women a voice in determining their own future.

The Civitas Panamericana Conference held in Argentina in September brought together members of government, the media, civic organizations and the private sector -- all of whom share a responsibility for conveying the tenets and values of democracy to the larger public. Encouraging women to get involved in the political life of their countries will strengthen civic culture and move us closer to our democratic ideals.

Finally, we face a serious challenge of reducing maternal mortality in the Americas.

More than 23,000 women will die this year in our hemisphere from causes related to pregnancy. Five women die every hour. Since we have been in this room, between 10 and 15 women have died. The numbers are unacceptable. Without access to voluntary family planning, women too often turn in desperation to illegal, unsafe abortions that can result in death.

Voluntary family planning enables women to make informed decisions about their own health and their reproductive options. As Bolivia has ably demonstrated, educating women about their own health -- about the benefits of spacing births, breastfeeding, good nutrition, prenatal and post partum visits and safe deliveries -- not only reduces maternal mortality and strengthens families, it also decreases the number of abortions.

Emergency obstetric care, now lacking in too many places in our hemisphere, is also vital. The United States, through USAID, will sign in a few moments a \$2.25 million regional grant to the Pan American Health Organization specifically aimed at improving emergency obstetric care. This grant is part of the Maternal Mortality Reduction Initiative that was adopted in Miami at the Summit of the Americas. The Mother Care project and the Quality Assurance project will provide additional support to nongovernmental organizations and to governments in Latin America and the Caribbean to improve responses to obstetric emergencies and the quality of care at community clinics as well as to teach the public about the need for prenatal and postnatal treatment and safe delivery.

These are among the initiatives and accomplishments that the people in this room can be proud of. We have worked hard and the work is beginning to pay off in improved conditions for women, children and families of our region. I am confident that if this work continues and if all of us are committed to raising our voices on behalf of the importance of improving the lives of women and girls in the Hemisphere, that we will continue to achieve positive results. I am also confident that if the media continues to cover these issues, as it has begun to do around our region, that the public will understand the mission that this conference represents and will join with all of us in making sure that the initiatives that we have adopted will be carried out.

Thank you all for your commitment and for the work and for the achievement that have already been accomplished. Thank you very much.