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MINISTER OF TOURISM**

**65<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the United Nations World Tourism  
Organization (UNWTO) Commission for the Americas**

***“Communication from the Chairman of the Commission”***

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Mr. Secretary-General, colleague Ministers, and delegates:

Let me begin by expressing my delegation's deepest disappointment that we were not in a position to host you last month, as scheduled. That was only one in a myriad of adjustments that we have had to make as individuals, communities, and nations in the face of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). Nevertheless, I look forward to welcoming you to our shores in the near future.

As we have experienced, the virus plunged the world economy into uncertainty, with travel and tourism highlighted as one of the most affected sectors. This represents the worst showing for international tourism since 1950 and puts an abrupt end to a 10-year period of sustained growth since the 2009 financial crisis.

We know well the information on the fallout to travel and tourism as well as the global economy. Our governments stand at this most critical juncture to **“stop, look, listen and pivot”**, i.e., assess the situation; craft strategic policies and responses; monitor the effective implementation of these policies; and prepare ourselves to further adjust and creatively manage vital developments vis-à-vis COVID-19.

Already for the first quarter, international tourism has recorded 67 million fewer arrivals and a loss of US\$80 billion in exports. The Americas is the third hardest hit region, with international arrivals down by 15.2%

compared to the same period in 2019. The region has also registered the slowest recovery of lost arrivals post crisis, using the 9/11 terrorist attacks as a case study where it took 42 months to return to previous figures.

According to the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), the region is facing the pandemic from a weaker position than the rest of the world. Before the pandemic, ECLAC had projected that the region would grow by a maximum of 1.3% in 2020. However, this forecast has been revised in light of the effects of the crisis, with GDP now predicted to fall by at least 1.8%. Nevertheless, as the pandemic evolves, forecasts of economic contractions of between 3% and 4%, or even more, cannot be ruled out.

Small island developing states (SIDS), like some of us in this region, face particular challenges to our sustainable development, including small populations, limited resources, vulnerability to natural disasters and external shocks, and strong dependence on international trade. A heavy and deepening reliance on tourism as a priority contributor to the Gross Domestic Product of our countries, accounting for over 50% of GDP in some cases, could further exacerbate the region's vulnerability in this present crisis. This is even as we recognize the immense potential of

travel and tourism to right our economies on the road to recovery and development.

In the case of Jamaica, external debt is 94% of GDP as at March 2019 and for March 2020, it is estimated to be slightly lower at 91%. The estimated contraction in GDP from COVID-19 for the Fiscal Year 2020/2021 is 5.1%.

Our projections have estimated an annual loss of J\$108 billion to the tourism sector for the fiscal year April 2020-March 2021 and a fallout of \$J38.4 billion to the Government from direct revenue from the sector.

It is clear that this is not business as usual. Therefore, our policy responses demand innovative thinking to match the dynamism of this current threat to sustainable development. Effective recovery and the “new normal” will be characterized by greater flexibility for the viability of businesses, particularly micro, small and medium sized tourism enterprises; a new and united generation (GenC) with strategies tailored to this emerging market; increased application of technology for digital transformation; new modes of work and measurements for productivity; as well as enhanced resilience.

Border re-openings and re-engagement with the international community are necessary to advance national and global recovery. In this regard, Jamaica welcomed tourists to re-discover our island, earlier this week on 15 June. It is still too early for any preliminary assessment

of the impact of this decision and its timing. However, the Jamaican Government rests confident that it has considered all relevant precautionary measures, including adoption of necessary workplace protocols as well as tailored protocols for the tourism industry.

These measures include, inter alia, establishment of a resilient corridor for controlled tourism travel; design of detailed operating protocols for each segment of the industry for which Jamaica has received global recognition and endorsement; certification of businesses for compliance; and a consolidation of the Tourism Product Development Co. as a driver for destination assurance management.

In our bid to guarantee a safe, secure, seamless and satisfying experience for tourists, the government has decided to test all visitors and intensify the collaboration between the Tourism and Health Ministries. This will add a layer of preparedness to urgently address the risk of any new imported COVID-19 positive cases. These measures will be as least restrictive as possible, with ongoing evaluation and management based on data and science.

As we “**stop, look, listen**” and take necessary steps to survive and thrive beyond this crisis, the spotlight shone brightly on several key takeaways too numerous to list. However, permit me to share a few that resonated.

**One**, we agree with the UNWTO that tourism will be a useful vehicle to drive recovery and re-balance our economies. The promotion of diversity and inclusion within the sector provides employment and opportunities for the most vulnerable populations. The sustainable development slogan of leaving no one behind applies just as much to inequalities among countries as it does to those that exist within countries – developing and developed. The systems and tools created to confront COVID-19 are useful guides for revising policies and procedures to take account of these social and economic realities.

**Two**, we are indeed resilient in the face of crises. I am amazed at how quickly individuals and businesses have adapted to the Zoom and Microsoft Meets culture. In fact, several businesses in the region have maintained staggered working days for staff, following governments' lifting of remote work arrangements. There is much needed research in the pipelines on COVID-19 business productivity, noting that some employees and employers observed improved levels of productivity with these arrangements.

**Three**, the value of linkages and abandoning the siloed approach in policy formulation and implementation. We have long tested the benefits of partnerships, including public-private partnerships. The region's recent experience with national multi-stakeholder tourism committees reminds

that diversity in perspective and positions make for a richer and improved outlook.

**Fourth**, countries with a deepening reliance on tourism for GDP will need to diversify their geographic source markets, toolkits, tourism products, and other economic industries to cushion against the effects of external disruptions such as epidemics/pandemics, terrorism, and natural disasters.

**Fifth**, these external disruptions, just mentioned, underscore the need for bolstering global institutions to enhance their own resilience and assist Member States and countries in capacity and resilience building. The good practice exemplified by the UNWTO's initiatives and efforts to confront COVID-19 provided Member States with strategic tools that could be tailored for national realities. In like manner, the Global Tourism Resilience and Crisis Management Centre – born out of UNWTO deliberations- is poised to render necessary assistance and expertise for recovery efforts.

There were opportunities born out of the region's COVID-19 response that compel us to maintain a certain approach even beyond this period. These include targeted support and focus on micro, small and medium size enterprises; re-thinking business models for a pivot rather than peril

scenario; and collective action and partnerships at the national, regional and multilateral levels.

The application of existing, new and emerging technologies for innovative responses to the challenges encountered during this period is testament that space remains to scale up the use of technology for increased efficiency.

We simply cannot return to the situation that existed pre-COVID19. In this regard, we recall the UNWTO slogan during this period “Stronger Together”. The principles of multilateralism must, indeed, ring true for greater cooperation and collaboration at the regional level and further, on the global stage. This is particularly important as we keep in view the existential threats to humanity such as climate change, food insecurity, and poverty that continue to plague some of our countries.

In closing, the Jamaican Government deeply appreciates the efforts of the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), under the able and steady leadership of Secretary-General Zurab Pololikashvili. The reports, research and initiatives undertaken by the UNWTO during this period were very useful and served as good foundation. The region was pleased to contribute to this process by virtue of our participation on the various Committees. The region further stands ready to collaborate with the organization and all Member States for improved solutions to the



greater benefit of our nationals, visitors and the wider international community.

Thank you.