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MINISTER OF TOURISM

66th Meeting of the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) Commission for the Americas

“Communication from the Chairman of the Commission”

24 June 2021
Excellencies, delegates,

It is my honour and pleasure to welcome you to the 66th session of the Regional Commission for the Americas of the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO). The last time we met in June 2020, it was the furthest thing from our minds that we would still be meeting virtually in 2021, notwithstanding our earnest efforts to reopen, recover and rebuild stronger and more resilient tourism industries.

I am further pleased to welcome here in Jamaica, Honourable Lisa Cummins, Tourism Minister of Barbados and our specially invited guest to the Regional Commission meeting- His Excellency Ahmed AlKhateeb, Tourism Minister of Saudi Arabia.

In service to the region as the Chairman of this valued Commission has been a signal honour for me and for the government and people of Jamaica. Like the region, we have taken great strides in the past year. Of all regions in the world, the Americas had the comparatively lowest decline of all regions in international tourist arrivals for the period January to March 2021 at 71%, even better than the global average decline of 83% and the region with the highest decline – Asia and the Pacific at 94% for the same period. This was partly due to improved performance in the Caribbean region - a glimmer of hope when one considers that the Caribbean is one of the most tourism-dependent regions in the world.

This information is readily available to tourism stakeholders through the latest UNWTO Barometer for January to March 2021 which highlights the economic toll of the pandemic. In this regard, “international tourism receipts in 2020 declined by 64% in real terms, equivalent to a drop of over US$ 900 billion, while the total loss in export revenues from international tourism amount to nearly US$ 1.1 trillion.” This is one of several laudable initiatives launched by the UNWTO to assist Member States to navigate the choppy waters of pandemic and post-pandemic tourism slump and recovery, after the most appalling year on record for the tourism sector in 2020. In the Americas, Member States made full use of these tools, technologies, and spaces to boost their own recovery as well as the wider global

In the spirit of “together, stronger” , as Chair of the CAM along with other colleagues from the region, we actively participated in the work of the UNWTO Global Tourism Crisis Committee for developing recommendations and strategies to restart and boost tourism. Jamaica also joined with other Member States in the region to contribute to the development of an International Code for the Protection of Tourists, noting that Brazil chaired the relevant Committee in its early meetings. We look forward to the update under that agenda item 7 later in the meeting’s programme.
As outlined in the Secretary-General’s report, the impact of COVID-19 on the tourism sector in the Americas saw a 68% decrease in international tourist arrivals in 2020, recording 70 million down from 219 million in 2019. According to UNWTO’s ninth report on travel restrictions, 10 destinations in the Americas (20% of all destinations in the Americas) had completely closed their borders as of 1 February 2021, with a downward trend in air traffic. We hope to put these downward trends and decreases behind, as we look ahead to the positive trends in the April data on hotel searches and bookings for the Caribbean and North America.

As we know all too well, even with the best-laid plans, we are no match for Mother Nature. According to UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs’ Report on Natural Disasters in Latin America and the Caribbean 2000-2019, our region is the second most disaster prone region in the entire world, with over 152 million persons affected by 1,205 disasters over the reported period. Floods are the most common disaster in the region, with Brazil ranking among the top 15 countries in the world with the greatest population exposed to river flood risk; 25% of earthquakes with magnitude of 8.0 and higher are recorded in South America, with the 2010 Haiti earthquake ranking among the top 10 deadliest earthquakes in human history; and 38 volcanic events affecting at least 3 million people. This region, is of course, no stranger to the devastating impact of storms and hurricanes in the region – for 2000 to 2019, there was an average of 17 hurricanes per year and 23 Category 5 hurricanes.

The eruption of the Soufriere volcano in St. Vincent and the Grenadines threatened to stifle the ongoing recovery of the tourism and travel sector in St. Vincent and the Grenadines and other affected countries. In my capacity as Chairman of the CAM, I organized and hosted a global summit with the affected countries for collaboration and support to assist our neighbouring island in their time of need. The outpouring of support to the Government and people of St. Vincent and the Grenadines and the wider Caribbean region demonstrated the true meaning of partnership for recovery and for a successful rebound.

As a region, we remain committed to practical and value-added solutions for the reactivation of the travel and tourism sector. Ministers of Tourism of this region agreed recently in Punta Cana in early May to this effect. I urge us to not only draft these important documents but to implement them effectively in our communities and countries. We are not restricted to multilateral cooperation only in the context of the UNWTO but have sought to create synergies between the processes and outcomes of the UNWTO will other organizations such as during the United Nations General Assembly, the Organisation of American States (OAS), the Caribbean Community and other regional entities as well as through bilateral engagements.
As it relates to the OAS, Mexico currently chairs the Inter-American Committee on Tourism (CITUR) and through that forum has sought to complement the work of the UNWTO on advancing harmonization of protocols and other measures for a swift return to travel and tourism. Jamaica, Costa Rica, Colombia, Chile and other countries from the Americas have been instrumental in serving as Chairs, co-chairs and members of working groups dedicated to actional recovery plans for the airline and cruise industries; climate change and sustainable development; and standardization of protocols.

This is the call now, Excellencies, to redouble our efforts to work together in practical and meaningful ways for a return to the successful days of travel and tourism. I hope that one outcome of this meeting, including the Ministerial Dialogue, will be not only a reiteration of our commitment and political will but at least one concrete step that the region can take together to reactivate tourism.

I take this opportunity to thank you for the confidence reposed in me as Chairman of this Regional Commission. I truly thank you all for your support during this tenure. Jamaica remains committed to the work of the UNWTO ably led by our Secretary-General and looks forward to being of further service to the region.

Gracias, Merci, Thank you.