



**Statement by**

**Dr. the Honourable Timothy Harris**

**Prime Minister of St. Kitts and Nevis**

**To the General Debate of the**

**76<sup>th</sup> Session of the United Nations General Assembly,**

**Friday, September 24, 2021**

*“Building resilience through hope - to recover from COVID-19, rebuild sustainably, respond to the needs of the planet, respect the rights of people and revitalize the United Nations”*

Mr. President, Mr. Secretary General, Distinguished delegates,

It is my privilege and honour to address the United Nations General Assembly today.

On behalf of the people of St. Kitts and Nevis, I extend my congratulations to His Excellency Abdulla Shahid of the Maldives, the Foreign Minister of a similar Small Island Developing State, on his election to the Presidency of the 76<sup>th</sup> Session of the UN General Assembly.

I thank his predecessor for his valuable work during the 75<sup>th</sup> Session and also take this opportunity to congratulate UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres for securing a second term.

I pay tribute to the diligence, commitment, and perseverance he has shown in steering the UN family as best as possible through the pandemic.

The theme of this General Assembly debate is fitting. It reminds us that we must keep faith in multilateralism and international cooperation to achieve our goals and rebuild sustainably.

The past 18 months have challenged everyone, everywhere, yet here we are - convening once more as a General Assembly - to find global solutions to global problems.

### **Health and COVID-19 pandemic**

The battle against COVID-19 is not yet won, and its devastating impact on our societies and economies continues.

We believe strongly that no one is safe until everyone is safe, that requires equitable access to vaccines and other medical products and technologies.

I commend the international community for its response to calls for vaccine equity and am pleased to say that St. Kitts and Nevis is just one of the many countries to have benefitted from the COVAX facility established by the World Health Organisation at the start of the pandemic. I also wish to thank our bilateral partners for their generosity in providing us with vaccines.

St. Kitts and Nevis has 66 percent of its adult population fully vaccinated and over 75 percent of the target population has received the first dose. We are endeavouring to improve these statistics in the near future.

Our citizens responded selflessly to our calls for social distancing and adhered to other COVID-19 protocols, playing an active role in curbing the COVID-19 pandemic and helping to overcome community spread.

Healthy lifestyles remain a central element in our fight against COVID-19, particularly as we continue to prioritise the delivery of health care to people living with non-communicable diseases who, given their higher risk are most vulnerable to the disease.

The need to continue investing in a resilient health system and comprehensive public health services is paramount. Mental health and wellbeing are also vital, which is why we delivered a comprehensive mental health plan to provide psychosocial support through the National Counselling Center.

Sadly, the economic impact of the pandemic will be felt for years to come. When it began, tourism our biggest economic driver ground to a halt, causing significant unemployment and underemployment. Businesses suffered as a result of lockdowns.

We took action, providing social protection programmes for those in need. We implemented an EC \$120 million COVID-19 stimulus package, reduced corporate

income tax for employers who retained 75% of their workforce, and introduced VAT and import duty waivers for pandemic related products.

## **Climate Change**

The impact of COVID-19 on development more widely, in particular the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, has also been significant but instead of walking away from them we need to work, collectively, even harder to achieve them.

Climate change and climate-related events continue to threaten the existence of Small Island Development States such as ours. As the climate crisis intensifies, we witness the erosion of coasts owing to rising sea levels; fisherfolk struggling to maintain their livelihoods from waning oceanic diversity; families forced to relocate away from coastal areas due to the strength, intensity and relentlessness of each passing hurricane season.

Sustainable Development Goals 13, 14 and 15 are of particular significance as they require us, among other things, to improve education and awareness of - as well as human and institutional capacity on - climate change mitigation, adaptation, impact reduction and early warning.

## **ICT and Bridging the Digital Divide**

A less negative outcome of the pandemic has been its effect in turbo-charging the digitization of our workplaces and societies. But not all countries – particularly Small Island Developing States - have the infrastructure, capacity and workforce skills to fully benefit from this revolution.

Rebuilding sustainably requires us to re-evaluate digital accessibility, affordability, and technical assistance so that every country regardless of income level or

geographic location can exploit the digital economy in one properly networked world.

### **GDP per capita as the benchmark for development**

Another barrier to development that we face is the criteria employed to determine aid and financial support. The singular benchmark for measuring development - GDP per capita - is critical but sadly, due to bias and the omission of factors, is simplistic and flawed.

For St. Kitts and Nevis it ignores vulnerabilities and prevents us from accessing critical development assistance. A set of more adequate and relevant measures - encompassing social, environmental/climate-related and economic factors – should be used to regulate entitlements. The use of a Multidimensional Vulnerability Index, for example, would be a far better judge of development than simply GDP per capita.

### **Small Arms and Light Weapons**

The protection of life from violent crime is also of fundamental importance and discussions surrounding Small Arms and Light Weapons remain critical to our democracy. Our position remains that the uncontrolled proliferation of the illicit trade of Small Arms and Light Weapons has significant impacts on the health and well-being, socio-economic development, human rights and human development of every citizen in the world.

The new challenges faced as a result of technological developments must also be taken into consideration and confronted. We will also continue to lend our voice and support to the work of the United Nations with a view to bringing about an end to the misery caused by these weapons.

## **Partnerships**

St. Kitts and Nevis prides itself on continuing to build strong alliances and increasingly expand our international footprint. Our diplomatic ties are founded on mutual respect for and adherence to the United Nations Charter, the rule of international law and on the appreciation of the value of human life and dignity.

For this reason, I call for the lifting of the economic, commercial, and financial embargo against Cuba, and I note the incalculable damage it causes. During the last four years, the blockade against Cuba has been reinforced with more than 240 coercive economic actions and measures, reaching unprecedented levels of hostility. The Government and people of Cuba have contributed much to my country, the Caribbean, and the world, especially during these unprecedented times. One can only imagine the potential of their contribution to the international community were the embargo lifted.

Furthermore, I cannot address this august body and not recognise our dear friend the Republic of China (Taiwan). St. Kitts and Nevis again renews its call for Taiwan's inclusion in the international community. We strongly believe Taiwan has an important and continuing role to play in international development strategies given their great success in many areas. Taiwan has demonstrated that it can be a true partner in health, and we have seen its exemplary response to the pandemic firsthand in St. Kitts and Nevis and other parts of the world.

My country looks forward to Taiwan being included in the UN system and its meetings, mechanisms, and activities.

## **Reparations**

St. Kitts and Nevis is pleased that a few days ago, we met to commemorate the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action. It is important

for the world to be united against racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance.

Untold suffering and evil were inflicted on millions of men, women and children of African descent, as a result of the transatlantic slave trade, colonialism, apartheid and many of the other ills of our history and other crimes against humanity.

We welcome the establishment of the Permanent Forum for People of African Descent, which will serve as a consultation mechanism for people of African descent and other interested stakeholders, and as a platform for improving the quality of life and livelihoods of people of African descent.

We make, as other CARICOM Heads of Governments did in 2013, a clarion call for reparations and reparatory justice. We subsequently formed the CARICOM Reparations Committee and the establishment of the 10-point plan that outlines the path to reconciliation and justice for victims of crimes against humanity and their descendants.

We hope that this meeting has invoked a renewed momentum to pursue action to right the wrongs that are still manifested today.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion.

We are all in this together; my hope is that we will emerge from COVID-19 stronger and more united than before.

There is no better place than the General Assembly to forge a positive consensus in order to build a better future for our children, our grandchildren, and their children.

We are living in unprecedented times, and we have responded admirably so far. But we must continue to be proactive, relentless, resilient, and willing to share our ideas and resources as members of the same brotherhood of nations.

We look therefore to the future with hope and with great expectation.

Thank you.