

26 January 2004

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Julian Robert Hunte,  
President of the 58th Session of the General Assembly,  
at the Official Opening Ceremony for the Inter-Regional Preparatory  
Meeting to Review the Implementation of the Barbados Programme  
of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing  
States**

Mr Moderator, Honourable Prime Minister, Mr Minister of Health, Mr Minister of Foreign Affairs and other Colleague Ministers, Mr Under-Secretary General and Secretary General of the SIDS Conference, Mr. Under-Secretary General, Mr. Secretary General of CARICOM, Excellencies, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen:

I wish to begin by expressing sincere appreciation to Prime Minister Christie and the Government and people of The Bahamas for the excellent arrangements they have made for this important meeting and for the gracious hospitality they have extended to us.

Turning to the matters at hand, I am reminded of the saying that "Leadership is action, not a position". As President of the United Nations General Assembly - and myself a representative of a small island developing state, St Lucia - I have come to this Interregional Preparatory Meeting here in Nassau to actively support the process leading up to the SIDS + 10 Conference to be convened in Mauritius in August of this year. That Conference also has my strong support.

Representatives of all the stakeholders in the SIDS initiative are here. It is the first time since the momentous Barbados Conference ten years ago that SIDS from all regions - the Caribbean, the Mediterranean, the South China Sea, and the Atlantic, Pacific and Indian Oceans - are joined by their partners to take up matters of critical concern to SIDS. Other States, donors, organs and agencies of the United Nations system, regional and international organisations, civil society and the private sector are here. Such wide-ranging representation must auger well for the success of this Interregional Preparatory Meeting.

This Meeting is a decisive step on the road to Mauritius. It is here that we will evaluate the findings and recommendations of the preparatory meetings held in the three regions. From these findings and recommendations, we will begin to craft the collective position we will recommend to the international conference in Mauritius. This position must be one that will reenergize and give new momentum to national, regional and international initiatives for the sustainable development of SIDS.

I believe that this process can only be advanced, including through the Commission on Sustainable Development, the preparatory body, if our assessment is frank and forthright. We have, indeed, made progress. It cannot be disputed, however, that the international community

has fallen short in implementing the goals and objectives of the Barbados Programme of Action. International action has been noticeable, but not noteworthy.

Our assessment will show that the SIDS took up the challenge - a considerable number of the tasks set out in the Barbados Programme of Action have been carried out by the SIDS themselves, including through their regional organisations. Action at the national and regional levels is critical, but in itself is not sufficient. International cooperation is essential. For although issues affecting SIDS are critical to them, their sustainable development is not simply a SIDS issue. It is a global issue, in much the same way that the development of SIDS is impacted by developments in the global system.

I believe that our review will also show, in particular, that the dramatic events and significant changes that have taken place in the world since the Barbados Programme of Action was adopted have profoundly impacted the sustainable development of SIDS. Globalisation and trade liberalisation have not yet proved to be a viable solution to the economic problems of a majority of the SIDS, and in many cases have compounded them. Regrettably, we live in a world where the rights of shareholders in a multinational corporation can be considered to have priority over the rights, for example, of banana growers in the Eastern Caribbean. Consequently, entire economies can be thrown into virtual collapse to protect shareholders rights.

The agricultural products that financed the development of many SIDS - sugar, bananas and cocoa among them - have been damaged, some beyond repair, under competition subsequent to the dismantling of preferential arrangements, in line with the agreed rules of the World Trade Organisation. Market access is not readily available for the products of SIDS. The SIDS have articulated a case for special and differential treatment that is urgently needed, but so far their advocacy has not yielded the desired results.

Natural disasters such as hurricanes, typhoons, and tidal waves can and do cripple entire economies in a few hours, severely impacting the vital tourism industry into which many SIDS have diversified. That very industry, however, has the potential to damage fragile ecosystems. SIDS are exceptionally vulnerable to climate change - international cooperation must be forthcoming to address this critical issue. Transportation and communications can heighten isolation and remoteness, and can significantly increase energy and other import costs. Debt and the continuing decline in levels of official development assistance also weigh heavily on SIDS. Still, the international community has yet to conclude a vulnerability index that would take these matters fully into account in determining the stage of development and level of development needs of SIDS.

International trafficking in drugs and in small arms and light weapons, and the threat of terrorism and other transborder crime have created urgent problems for many SIDS, especially those like The Bahamas that are archipelagos. Many SIDS, particularly those in the Caribbean, also face the new and growing health and development challenge of HIV/AIDS, so destructive to small populations. Access to affordable medicines is critical. Addressing these challenges draw heavily on national budgets, and can effectively disrupt even the most well planned development

strategy. Yet, good governance dictates that governments act decisively to eradicate poverty and to achieve economic and social progress for their people, in line with the Millennium Development Goals.

This is not to say that SIDS have not enjoyed a measure of success in their development efforts - a number of them have performed well. Many are also highly visible and influential on the international stage. Conscious as we are to the loss of many of our best and brightest to the industrialised countries because we cannot afford to sustain them, their achievements speak tellingly of the SIDS from which they come.

This Interregional Preparatory Meeting has serious and vital issues to address, and time is not on our side. Mauritius is only a brief period away. I would say that we have adequately analysed and diagnosed the challenges facing SIDS. It is now time to empower SIDS to implement policies and programmes that would put them on the straight path to sustainable development.

We act most effectively when we act together. Together, we must draw on the commitments made in respect of the United Nations development agenda at the International Conference on Financing for Development, the World Summit on Sustainable Development and the expected outcome of UNCTAD XI, to be held in Brazil in June of this year. Together, we must support our regional and interregional organisations including AOSIS, which have done much to articulate the goals and aspirations of SIDS, and strengthen the United Nations Secretariat organs that support SIDS.

Together we must ask and answer the critical questions arising from the outcomes of the three regional meetings that would permit us to set meaningful priorities. Commitments including pledges of support must be clearly defined so that they may be matched with goals and objectives. Our agreed outcome must focus on solutions that are action-oriented, within timeframes and directed to specific partners for implementation. Importantly, we must marshal the political will to make and keep commitments to ensure the full and effective implementation of the Barbados Programme of Action. This must be our goal in Mauritius. I give my commitment, as President of the General Assembly, to do all I can on behalf of a cause that is close to my heart and to yours.

I thank you.