

20 February 2004

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Julian Robert Hunte,  
President of the 58th Session of the General Assembly,  
at the Caribbean-American Chamber of Commerce (CACCI)  
Ceremony for the Awarding of the Cacci Distinguished Medal of  
Service**

Mr. Master of Ceremonies, Mr. President and CEO of the Caribbean American Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Mr. Chairman and other members of the Board, Mr. Corporate Chair, Excellencies, Government Officials, distinguished ladies and gentlemen: good evening.

It is a particular pleasure for me that CACCI has selected me for its Distinguished Medal of Service. I accept this Medal with great pride, as representative of my country, St Lucia and a CARICOM national who has the singular honour of serving as President of the United Nations General Assembly. Mr. Hastick, may I extend my sincere appreciation to you, the Board of Directors and the members of CACCI for this honour.

Over more than a century, a special relationship has developed between the Caribbean and the United States of America, impelled by the thousands of Caribbean people who have migrated to this country. The successes of this Caribbean Diaspora are manifested in virtually every aspect of life in this country - social, economic, cultural and political - and are a source of great pride for all in the region. Might I emphasize, therefore, that the relationship between the Caribbean and the United States is a mutually beneficial one.

Today, our diaspora in this country remains a vital link between our region and the United States, and a source of support for our young developing countries. Often when we speak of the support our countries receive from the diaspora, the tendency is to point to the obvious - "remittances" sent by those abroad to the Caribbean, which not only support families, but is also an important source of foreign exchange.

CACCI and our diaspora communities know that commitment to the Caribbean region requires much more. It requires us all to dedicate our minds, energy and resources in innovative and creative ways to further the socio-economic development of the countries of the region, in a rapidly changing and challenging global environment.

The time, my friends, is right for CACCI to move to another level. Recent years have been fraught with disappointments for the countries of the Caribbean, and the years ahead loom large with uncertainty. Caribbean countries have had to confront challenge after challenge, with tools clearly inadequate to the task.

More than anything Caribbean Governments would have done, or failed to do, global economic developments are a significant cause of the region's predicament. Let us not forget that global circumstances and forces beyond their power and control, as well as events and developments in which they have no fundamental stake, can rock the foundations of small island developing states.

In recent years, globalization and trade liberalization, spurred by rapidly advancing technology, moved to center stage with promises of progress and development for all. Trade was to be freed up; markets were to be opened; new mechanisms such as the World Trade Organization were to supersede the old regional or common-interest groups through which we had previously worked. New terms of trade were to replace existing systems such as regional preferences for agricultural products, as they had existed under the Lomé and other agreements. Many were the promises made.

Experience has shown that in a world that has become a global village, power, influence and prosperity is disturbingly unequal. Open markets have benefited the economically strong, as has many of the rules of the WTO; the Free Trade Area of the Americas is beset with conflicting interests, again of the major players. In the meantime, we see investments move out of the Caribbean region to areas of lower costs, as the prices of the region's commodities fall and its efforts to diversify into financial and other services are challenged.

To the costs of keeping up in an increasingly technological and knowledge driven global economy, Caribbean countries must add many unanticipated costs. Continuing efforts to counter the illicit drug trade and trade in small arms and light weapons and stepping up security measures to combat international terrorism, for example, add significant new costs to national budgets. At the same time, levels of official development assistance continue to sink to new lows.

The manner in which Governments continue to forge ahead in the face of significant odds is very much to the credit of the Caribbean peoples, and very typical of the region. Modernizing government is a priority - making it easier and less costly to do business; enhancing the efficiency of the bureaucracy and streamlining procedures; training and equipping youth to function in a knowledge-based economy; seeking more and better market information, to enhance markets access; and moving away from reliance on one major export to look for new niche markets, for example in tourism and financial services.

There are other things Caribbean countries must do. They must produce more, of greater variety. They must consume more of what is produced internally and regionally. Most urgently, they must, in innovative ways, develop new export products that use the goods and services the region has, and stimulate demand for these goods and services.

I am pleased to say that Caribbean countries have realized some successes. Now, we need cooperation to translate important victories into further progress. This, as they say, is where CACCI comes in. It has an important role to play in contributing to strategies to reach national as well as international goals, such as the United Nations Millennium Development Goals.

Let me here acknowledge the many ways in which the C.A.C.C.I. has worked to support our region and its business sector. I want you to know how much your efforts are recognized and appreciated, specifically because I want to ask you to do even more.

We have with us here tonight a number of Government officials and policy makers. CACCI can assist by ensuring that they have a clearer understanding of Caribbean issues and needs, so that they may take these into account in their relations with the Caribbean.

Capacity building is critical to the further growth and development of the Caribbean. CACCI could intensify its efforts to forge strategic alliances between business persons and entities in the Caribbean and in the United States. An essential part of this effort would be to provide information to assist Caribbean businesses and persons to understand and access markets in the United States.

We are all aware that it is not Governments that trade, but companies. CACCI should therefore seek to have its position reflected in the strategies and policies adopted in international trade negotiations. Agreement on business friendly measures that take into account the circumstances of the countries of the Caribbean would facilitate both CACCI's efforts and long-term investment in the region.

As President of the United Nations General Assembly, I wish to say the organization has made significant efforts to put in place a comprehensive development agenda. In this context, commitments have been made and priorities for development have been agreed. CACCI can play an important role in influencing the policies, levels and terms of the contributions in respect of Caribbean countries.

CACCI can also assist by encouraging and promoting the cooperation and collaboration necessary to assist Caribbean countries in addressing critical social issues such as illicit drug trafficking, HIV/AIDS and crime. These matters also profoundly affect development in the Caribbean.

Our Caribbean peoples are known for their industry and ingenuity. We have proven that we can and will compete where there is a level playing field. We need action and practical measures that will ensure that we can achieve our long-term goals and objectives. This occasion, I believe, should launch a new era of creative co-operation, in which CACCI will continue to provide leadership in bringing new and exciting opportunities to the diaspora and to the Caribbean.

I thank you.