

UPF-Central America and Caribbean Webinar: Opportunities for the Caribbean

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Costa Rica -- On July 11, 2020, UPF-Central America and the Caribbean held a "Peace Talks" web conference titled "The Caribbean in the Era of the Covid-19 Pandemic: Challenges and Opportunities." The conference had 100 attendees from 42 countries.

Rev. Leonidas Belliard (Director, Family Federation for World Peace and Unification, Caribbean region) gave opening remarks. Today we are dealing in this conference with a mandatory subject, he said. The COVID 19 pandemic, with more than 12 million infected and half a million deaths, is a strange, unpredictable sickness that has brought nations to their knees. As a part of the globalized community the Caribbean region has participated in this world situation.

Surely God must want to give us a lesson that we should remember our original purpose in life. Even though it hasn't come in the way we would have liked, we are starting to value our families, building better parent–children relationships, better husband–wife relationships and better taking care of nature, which is our first textbook. Reverend Belliard sees something very positive at the end of the tunnel called "the Covid-19 pandemic," and it is a decrease in the speed of destruction we were taking before.



Panelists

Dr. Sterling Belgrove (Chairman, Rose Foundation, Trinidad and Tobago) served as the emcee and

introduced the panelists.

Dr. Charles S. Yang (Regional Chair, UPF, Central America and the Caribbean) was the first panelist to speak. The pandemic has particularly devastated the Caribbean nations, which rely heavily on tourism. The virus ignores borders, and UPF has a special role as an international institution to help. UPF's philosophy of living for the sake of others and its insight that all humanity is connected as one family under God are particularly valuable in this era.



H.E. Dame Pearlette Louisy (Governor General, Saint Lucia, 1997–2017) spoke next. She gave a general overview of the challenges to the region brought by the pandemic. Island nations are particularly vulnerable due to their size, isolation, and dependence. Islands must build resilience to weather crises. Climate change has been a looming threat to these nations, but Covid-19 has become the most immediate challenge. The economic shock has caused a significant drop in tax revenue, which has, in turn, hampered the ability to respond to the crisis and stimulate economies. Indigenous and foreign financial institutions have offered some relief, but it is not sufficient on its own. Medical brigades from Cuba have helped supplement the medical labor supply. In spite of the heavy blow that Covid-19 has struck the region, it has also helped the Caribbean region appreciate the value of scientific, government, and economic cooperation.



Hon. Dr. Godwin Friday (Member of Parliament, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines) gave an overview of the situation in St. Vincent and the Grenadines. The first case was detected on March 11, and since then the disease has been eradicated on the island. The social and economic impact of the pandemic remain. An economic stimulus and relief package was passed in April, which Dr. Friday described in detail. Hon.

Dr. Friday pushed for more oversight and accountability measures that have not been implemented. Fortunately, agreements have been negotiated to allow travel among certain Caribbean countries. On the other hand, 395 businesses have partially or completely shut down due to the crisis. There is also uncertainty regarding the reopening of schools.

Hon Ana María Domínguez (Governor, Santiago, Dominican Republic) followed with her remarks, summarizing the situation in the Dominican Republic. The virus reached its borders on March 1. A state of emergency was declared on March 18 and lifted on July 1. The World Bank has sent 150 million dollars in aid to the Dominican Republic's containment efforts.



Mrs. Vicki Ann Assevero (Founder and Director, Green Market, Santa Cruz, Trinidad and Tobago) spoke next on the subject of peace. She challenged the notion of peace as an absence of violence and tension; she put forward, following Martin Luther King Jr., the notion that peace requires the presence of justice. She added that peace demands the presence of biodiversity, environmental protection, respect, and dignity. The Caribbean nations are shining jewels of natural and cultural diversity. The Caribbean region is traditionally thought of as the island nations within that sea, but Mrs. Assevero sees the region as also including the non-island nations that surround the Caribbean, including parts of South and Central America as well as the United States. There is need to reduce the length of supply chains for vital resources to reduce the effects of climate change. Improvements must be made to the region's educational infrastructure in order to reduce crime and increase security. Investment now in regional production of food and talent will allow for a more vibrant and secure Caribbean in the post-Covid world.

QandA Followed: Regarding the role of families, Mrs. Assevero pointed to several civil society organizations in Trinidad and Tobago working to help families deal with the stress of isolation at home. H.E. Dame Louisy pointed out how the consequences of isolation for families range from positive effects of families having time together that they might not have had to the negative effects of domestic stress. Regarding the shock to tourism industries, Honorable Dr. Friday made clear that the most important factor in a resumption of tourism is safety: If travelers do not feel safe, tourism will continue to suffer.

Reflection of Cuban participants:

We welcome the different and interesting criteria raised by the panelists who for their diversity have fed our knowledge about the effect of Covid-19 on our Caribbean countries. Our thanks go to the Reverend Leonidas, who at the beginning recognized the effort made by Cubans. So did H.E. Dame Pearlette Louisy, who referred to the work of Cuban doctors supporting countries in the Caribbean. The number of Cubans participating as Ambassadors for Peace was superior to the prior conference, and we will make an effort to continue participating in such important events.