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REMARKS – TOURISM AND HEALTH CARPHA WORKSHOP 2014

Protocol having been established, I do bid all present a good afternoon from the “Beautiful by Nature” Turks and Caicos Islands. The Caribbean is known for many things such as cricket, Bob Marley and Reggae, Calypso and Carnival, many great rums just to name a few, but, when one who is not from this region thinks of the Caribbean, what comes first and foremost in their mind is the expectation of a truly great and memorable Caribbean vacation!

Tourism has been the mainstay of many of the economies of our Caribbean nations and for several of our island nations, tourism contributes to greater than 50 percent of their GDPs. Overall, travel and tourism contributes in excess of \$49 billion to the total GDP of the Caribbean region, representing 14 percent and a projected growth rate of 4 percent per annum up until 2024; it is these rates that enable our Caribbean to be ranked 10th in growth rate amongst 12 regions.

So we can boast that Tourism is our business; but as we recognize that it is increasing the wealth of this region, we must also recognize that the competition is real. Our competitiveness as a region is being challenged by the struggling Caribbean economies and further compounded by many of our nations endeavoring to adjust to a tourist-based economy, from the traditional revenue-earning, and the now-declining sectors, of manufacturing and agriculture. Therefore, there is a must, for us to be innovative in the protection and positioning of our tourism product.

The Nassau Declaration states that the health of this region is the wealth of the region. Health has a vital role to play in the competitiveness and sustainability of Caribbean tourism. Our tourism industry is constantly under threat as Governments struggle to find funding for Education, Health and other much needed Social programmes; as the speed and frequency of travel from other regions bring new and emerging diseases to our shores and as social decay of our very values and rising unemployment contribute to the increasing number of incidents of violent crimes and reduced safety of visitors and residents alike. These threats, ladies and gentlemen, are real, and we, as regional Governments and our private sectors must join efforts and act now, if we are to successfully reverse these trends and persevere against the many hazards that threaten the sustainability of the mainstay of our economies.

The Turks and Caicos Islands has fallen victim to hotel-closure, due to outbreaks of communicable diseases brought to our shores, and we have also seen the closure of cruise ports, due to food-borne related illnesses, both of which came at significant loss of revenue, in the millions of dollars, and to some extent

reputational damage, due to the poor visitor experience directly related to the incidents. The Caribbean Tourism Organization (CTO) has recently initiated a Total Visitors Satisfaction (TVS) programme called “Guestpality”, of which, safety and security are major components in determining the satisfaction of our guests. Guest satisfaction is a critical factor in determining whether or not a visitor will return to this region, and whether or not they will recommend the Caribbean to someone else. To ensure that we remain competitive, as the destination of choice, thereby securing the profitability and sustainability of our tourism industry, we must develop Health in Tourism (HIT) programmes that will guarantee the health, safety, security and well-being of our visitors and residents.

I must pause to recognize and commend Dr. Hospedales, for his vision and determination, in championing such an important initiative as this, first under the umbrella of the then CAREC in 2006, and now under CARPHA, and most importantly, for partnering with the Caribbean Tourism Organization in hosting this workshop, thereby fostering a relationship that is key to our success. This partnership is an example of the kind of relationships that are required at all levels. No longer should the tourism sector view public health programmes as being the intellectual property of the Ministries of Health, no longer should the hotel sector be so fearful of the Ministry of Health and Public Health regulators that they attempt to conceal emerging health threats that eventually erupt into disasters. The HIT policy approach should be one of collaboration, with hazard-specific empowerment at critical locations for prevention, detection, intervention and control. Inter-sectoral collaboration is a must, and requires active participation and collaboration between hoteliers, cruise port and airport managers and public health staff and others, at all levels. There is also a need for greater inter-Governmental collaboration. An adverse event on one island in the Caribbean is generalized in international forums, as being the Caribbean as a whole, and in turn negatively impacts the tourism industry of all islands. Further, the risk of rapidly spreading communicable diseases across sovereign boundaries has increased and now facilitated by increasing air and sea travel between the island nations. Therefore, it is imperative that we develop a strong and robust network of health-intelligence and information-sharing between Governments, and Government agencies, for better protection of the health of our guests, and indeed our residents.

There has been increasing levels of success in the collaborative efforts for the financing of marketing and promotion of tourism in our individual islands and the region as a whole by public and private sectors that establish marketing funds specifically for the purpose. However, the concept of a Health Fund for the vital protection of our tourism investment and economic mainstay remains foreign to many and is often deemed as the sole responsibility of the Ministries of Health. But, if we are serious about mitigating economic shocks, if we are serious about the sustainability of our tourism industry, if we are serious about consistent economic growth, a collaborative HIT protection fund is a must, and should be established through legislation that involves both the public and private sectors, and have the flexibility to raise capital and engage in external partnerships. The mandate of such an organization should be the funding and development of programmes, that will effectively prevent the transmission of new, and emerging, biological agents involved in disease outbreaks, thus intervening and controlling occurrences of these situations earlier, thereby protecting, and facilitating, the health, safety, security and overall satisfaction

of our guests, while also protecting and promoting the health of our residents. As a doctor and the Minister of Tourism, in my mind, this could only be a recipe for success.

Again I wish to thank the organizers of this most valuable workshop, as it is indeed critical to the well-being of the people of our beloved Caribbean region. Thank you.
