COMMITTEE ON PARTNERSHIP OEA/Ser.W

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TEXTUAL

**REMARKS OF THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE OAS**

**AMBASSADOR NESTOR MENDEZ**

**Presentation to the Committee on Partnership for Development Policies of the Inter-American Council for Integral Development (CIDI), on the Inter-American Committee on Natural Disasters Reduction (IACNDR)**

OAS Headquarters, Washington DC

Simon Bolivar Room

March 3, 2020

Lilia Sánchez de Morehead, Chair of the Inter-American Council for Integral Development (CIDI) Committee on Partnership for Development Policies and Alternate Representative of the Dominican Republic to the OAS;

Members of the Inter-American Committee on Natural Disasters Reduction (IACNDR);

Distinguished Delegates,

* Thank you Madam Chair for including this important item on today’s agenda. Let me begin by commending the Committee on Partnership for Development Policies for its work aimed at strengthening the role of the OAS to support Member States’ efforts to respond to increasingly frequent natural disasters in the region.
* This is an extremely important exercise as we seek to clearly establish and enhance the role of the OAS in facilitating a more targeted, collaborative and timely response to natural disasters.
* To that end, I would like to thank the OAS Executive Secretariat for Integral Development (SEDI) and its Department of Sustainable Development, as well as the Secretariat for Multidimensional Security for preparing the study on the tools and entities of the Inter-American System to address natural disaster response.
* I have underscored on several occasions, and do so again today, the importance of finding our organization’s particular niche and value added to the Inter-American System in the field of disaster mitigation and humanitarian assistance. Despite our limited resources, we do have extensive technical experience and unique convening power.
* The Inter-American Committee on Natural Disaster Reduction (IACNDR) is a great example of this convening power. This Committee was established in 1999 with the main purpose of acting “*as the principal forum of the Inter-American system for analyzing issues related to natural and other disasters, including the prevention and mitigation of their effects, in coordination with the governments of member states; competent national, regional, and international organizations; and nongovernmental organizations.”*
* In 2006, the General Assembly adopted AG/RES.2182 (XXXXVI-0/06), amending the statutes of the Committee. In doing so, the Inter-American Committee on Natural Disaster Reduction (IACNDR) assumed all duties and functions of the Inter-American Emergency Aid Committee under the Inter-American Convention to Facilitate Disaster Assistance, as well as those of the Inter-American Committee for Emergency Situation under the Inter-American Emergency Aid Fund (FONDEM).
* Furthermore, in relation to disaster response, the Committee “*seeks to strengthen hemispheric actions to achieve maximum international cooperation in support of national and/or regional efforts for timely prevention, preparedness, early warning, response, … emergency care, … rehabilitation, and reconstruction”*.
* In 2011 Member States adopted AG/RES.2647 (XLI-0/11), instructing the General Secretariat “*to activate the* Inter-American Committee on Natural Disaster Reduction *(IACNDR) in the event of emergency situations requiring international assistance in the region.”*
* Early in my mandate, Secretary General Luis Almagro and I agreed that I would chair this Committee, which had been largely dormant for many years. In doing so, over the last few years my office has taken the lead in coordinating our General Secretariat’s response to natural disasters emergencies in the region.
* Since 2016, the Inter-American Committee on Natural Disaster Reduction (IACNDR) has met several times during times of crisis to ensure efficient coordination with all the agencies of the Inter-American System that focus on disaster prevention and mitigation. It has also been convened prior to the hurricane seasons in order to take stock of preparatory measures and assess established capacity in the region to ensure a coordinated response to expected natural disasters.
* The Committee has met to define concrete actions and strengthen coordinated multilateral action to respond to the immediate needs in Member States in the aftermath of:
* Hurricane Earl (2016);
* Hurricane Mathew (2016);
* Hurricane Irma (2017),
* Hurricane Jose (2017),
* Hurricane Maria (2017)
* Hurricane Dorian (2019); as well as after the tragic earthquakes in Ecuador (2016), and Mexico and Guatemala (2017), and in response to the eruption of “Volcán de Fuego” in Guatemala (2018).
* During these emergency meetings, the Committee was able to receive timely updates on the situation of the nations impacted and to play an important role in defining concrete and practical actions with the agencies of the Inter-American System. The various agencies that comprise the Inter-American Committee on Natural Disaster Reduction include:
* The Inter-American Development Bank (IDB),
* The Pan American Health Organization (PAHO);
* The Pan American Institute of Geography and History (PAIGH),
* The Pan American Development Foundation (PADF),
* The Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA),
* The Inter-American Agency for Cooperation and Development (IACD),
* The Inter-American Defense Board (IADB), and
* The Inter-American Commission of Women (CIM).
* As Member States and Permanent Observers continue to express interest in providing support during times of emergencies, my office has extended invitations to them to participate during these meetings. We have also invited international financial institutions and international organizations with representation in Washington, DC. Occasionally, coordination was sought with sub-regional specialized inter-governmental organizations.
* The OAS has played an important role in strengthening the Inter-American System’s capacity to respond to natural disasters. Yet, we have also learned that the increase in humanitarian actors and intra-regional disaster response assistance calls for a renewed role of the OAS General Secretariat to facilitate the international response to disasters and to strengthen the collaborative provision of assistance by OAS Member States, Permanent Observers and other entities to those affected member states.
* A practical approach is certainly needed. We do support the recommendations and proposed actions included in the Study of the Tools and Entities of the Inter-American System to Address Natural Disaster Response.
* One of the proposed recommendations is to revise the current membership of the Committee to include sub-regional specialized inter-governmental organizations and agencies of the UN System as well as international humanitarian and disaster response agencies. This would enable the Committee to play a meaningful role in promoting a hemispheric approach to disaster risk management in the Americas. Consideration of such an expansion of the Committee membership should be given particular attention, as this would benefit its main objectives.
* Additionally, inclusion of sub-regional specialized inter-governmental organizations such as the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency (CDEMA) and the Coordination Center for the Prevention of Natural Disasters in Central America (CEPREDENAC) would improve the identification of supplementary disaster response requirements, while minimizing overlaps, and establishing priorities and timetables for timely international response.
* It is worth noting that as per Article 6.c of the Statutes of the Committee, the Chair of the Committee can invite these organizations or any other that he or she deems necessary. And while the coordinating units or executive secretariats of these organizations have not been present at all the meetings convened, SEDI, through its Department of Sustainable Development, has reviewed situation reports and other relevant information produced by these organization to share with Committee members, and in some cases, consulted directly with their officials on their response and additional requirements.
* Realistically, it may be challenging for such agencies to be able to participate in our meetings when disasters occur as they, without a doubt, will be focused on their response actions. Yet, their participation in planning and programmatic meetings of the Committee –during times when there are no impending or active emergencies, would be beneficial.
* Likewise, inclusion of international organizations such the International Federation of the Red Cross, or foreign assistance agencies of OAS Member States such as; the US Agency for International Development, Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance; Canada Foreign Affairs and the White Helmets Initiative of Argentina, could yield benefits in setting priorities, identifying gaps and additional requirements, and avoiding overlaps. These agencies have been invited to certain meetings convened by my office and in some cases, they have participated.
* In short, the current statutes provide authority to the Chair of the Committee to invite non-members of the Committee, and that has been the practice. Yet, expanding the membership could provide for a more organic integration of relevant disaster response actors.
* Effective participation of members will require revision of the mission and activities of the Inter-American Committee on Natural Disaster Reduction for enhancing collaboration with sub-regional specialized inter-governmental organizations and others.
* As mentioned earlier, the main focus of the Committee as per its original intention is in the coordination of the efforts of agencies of the Inter-American System for disaster prevention and mitigation, as well as preparedness, recovery and reconstruction. The revision of its statutes in collaboration with its current members and relevant disaster response actors could increase the likelihood of participation of all and in turn enhance its overall performance.
* The FONDEM could provide financial resources to support the financial requirements of members of the Committee, Member States and Permanent Observers, particularly in recovery and reconstruction efforts, as coordination among agencies and states require time that in the phases of disaster relief and early response would only delay delivery of services.
* Madam Chair, as we strive to maximize our work in building capacity for disaster preparedness and move towards defining and enhancing our role in facilitating international disaster response, today’s deliberations and future decisions undertaken by this body are of the utmost importance.
* The OAS Secretariat is well positioned to continue supporting the efforts of the region in advancing a more robust and coordinated multilateral cooperation for international disaster assistance. It is my sincere wish that your work here will help us to better define and enhance our role so that we may respond more effectively and ensure our citizens receive the much-needed assistance in their time of need.

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