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Remarks to the
Inter-American Drug Abuse Control Commission (CICAD)

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I would like to thank Secretary General Insulza and Chairman Uchoa for their remarks, and the rest of the CICAD leadership and staff for their hard work in putting this meeting together. It is an honor to be here with my fellow delegates and representatives of observer countries and organizations at the opening of this 41st regular session of CICAD. For more than 20 years this body has worked to reduce the devastating impact of drug production, trafficking, and addiction in the hemisphere. We can say with pride that we have made progress for our citizens.

Perhaps one of CICAD's greatest achievements is the Multilateral Evaluation Mechanism (MEM). This innovative tool allows us to reflect on the progress we have made, but, more importantly, it has ushered in an era of unprecedented transparency. The MEM allows us to clearly confront the challenges and problems that remain before us as a hemisphere to ensure that our record of progress continues.

I am aware that one of the key challenges to drug control efforts in our hemisphere comes from my country. Drug consumption in the United States represents a negative contribution to the region, providing funding for terrorist groups, encouraging attacks on institutions of justice, distorting economies, and damaging the environment.

In encouraging stronger action and greater cooperation in drug control efforts, the United States is aware that it cannot ask its neighbors to do what it has not done itself. Fortunately, however, my country has encountered some success in reducing its drug consumption in recent years. Five years have passed since President Bush set ambitious goals to reduce youth drug use in the United States - a 10 percent reduction over two years and a 25 percent reduction over 5 years. The results are in: youth drug use fell by 11 percent over two years and by 23.2 percent over five years.

The overall statistics are all the more encouraging when examined according to specific drug. Use of marijuana among young Americans is down by 25 percent, use of synthetic drugs such as MDMA and Ecstasy has fallen by almost 60 percent, and use of methamphetamine among young people is half of what it was in 2001.

These youth trends are echoed by trends in biometric data collected from the adult workplace population. Workplace drug test results from across the United States show significant declines in the percentage of adults testing positive for drugs such as marijuana and cocaine.

Perhaps most importantly to our neighbors in the hemisphere, use of cocaine in the United States is now just a fraction of what it was during the height of the trade in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

While these results are encouraging, challenges certainly remain. The United States is seeking to address these challenges by employing a wide array of innovative tools in the fields of health, education, and criminal justice. In the health field we are expanding the use of screening and brief intervention in medical settings to identify drug abuse problems before they become addictions. This effort will be furthered by the recent approval of codes in the U.S. Medicaid system that will allow doctors to be reimbursed for screening and intervention services. In the criminal justice system, drug courts have spread across the United States, offering non-violent offenders with drug problems an alternative to jail and an opportunity for treatment. In education, random, non-punitive student drug testing programs are being adopted by an ever-increasing number of school districts, giving young people a socially acceptable reason to resist drug use.

We must also be alert to rising drug threats, such as that of prescription drug abuse. Misuse of prescription drugs is now the second most common form of illicit drug use in the United States. This form of substance abuse is particularly challenging due to its unique characteristics. For example, we know that the majority (about 60 percent) of past year non-medical users of prescription drugs received the drugs for free from a friend or a relative. We also know that these drugs are readily available to young people through the internet. The U.S. is tackling this issue head-on, educating parents about the dangers of keeping unused prescription drugs in the household and focusing investigations on internet trafficking rings and illegal online pharmacies. I am encouraged to see these kinds of issues on the agenda at CICAD and look forward to working with other member states to improve our cooperation against this threat.

My government is also encouraged by the progress achieved by its neighbors in the hemisphere against drug trafficking threats that have faced us for years. Colombia, for example, has aggressively attacked the drug trafficking threat, improving public security and making a positive and unparalleled impact on the drug trafficking situation in our region. Mexico's recent actions to reduce the flow of drugs through its territory and improve security are inspiring. CICAD has been instrumental in ensuring that efforts such as these – and by all member states - are coordinated, transparent, and effective.

Unfortunately, drugs remain the most serious cause of poverty, the most serious source of denial of rights, and the most serious cause of violence, death, and illness in our hemisphere. Through CICAD we have reached a consensus that we can - and should - attack both the supply and demand for illicit drugs.

We are at a crossroads in the international fight against illegal drugs, however. Never before have there been such negative forces in the international community – those that advocate giving up and accepting drug use. They view treatment and recovery with cynicism, suggesting that we should just push the addicted to the side, to enable their drug use in a way that reduces its inconvenience to the rest of us, and to allow the disease of addiction to consume them.

We reject this notion. We do not accept slavery to chemistry. We have made the problem smaller, and together, through CICAD, the “anti-drug cartel,” we can make it smaller still. Thank you all for your friendship, for your service, and for the sacrifices you have made in this noble effort.