

Statement by Senator the Honourable Dennis Moses, Minister of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs, in observance of Commonwealth Day 2020

'Delivering a Common Future: Connecting, Innovating, Transforming'

On March 9, 2020, the Commonwealth will celebrate its 71st anniversary under the theme of “Delivering a Common Future: Connecting, Innovating, Transforming”. This theme challenges the Commonwealth family of nations to build on its well-founded history and tradition of harnessing the ‘Commonwealth connection’ of peacebuilding, goodwill and collaboration to propel this body into a new era of strengthened cooperation, innovation and transformation. As we approach the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) Rwanda 2020, we are called upon to address the drastic decline of our land, seas and ambient environment, to mitigate adverse climate impacts and to manage the sustainable use of scarce resources, while pursuing socio-economic inclusion and empowerment, promoting fair and enhanced trade, promoting democratic ideals and embracing the opportunities presented by science, technology and innovation.

Over the past 71 years, the Commonwealth has evolved to meet the needs of a rapidly changing and ever-demanding world, in which human rights injustices have become more glaring, environmental stresses and threats have become more acute, security risks are becoming more intricate, and the challenges of small and vulnerable states are growing in impact, urgency and complexity. Despite prevailing challenges, the Commonwealth remains true to the values and principles espoused in its Charter and committed to improving the lives, wellbeing, developmental capacity and economic prospects of some 2.4 billion Commonwealth citizens in 54 Member States. The Commonwealth continues to highlight the precarious situation of the small and vulnerable states which comprise two-thirds of its membership, as it seeks to increase resilience and enhance capacity among fragile states.

Commonwealth Day 2020 also presents an opportune moment for Trinidad and Tobago to extend sincere congratulations and good wishes to the Republic of Maldives on its return to the Commonwealth fold.

In 2020, the Commonwealth finds itself at a unique crossroad where the potential of innovation must be unleashed to address the problems and perils of underdevelopment and a global climate emergency which is affecting every geographic region of the Commonwealth. Manifestations of the climate-related incidents include raging bushfires which have decimated the Australian landscape and intense drought which has impacted Member States in Africa and the Caribbean. Our Pacific neighbours continue to battle against the deluge of rising seas and dying reefs while another onslaught of hurricanes ripped through the Caribbean region with “Dorian” ravaging The Bahamas. Asia has not been spared and was battered by an extreme season of monsoons and cyclones last year.

These events have unfolded against the backdrop of the mushrooming Covid-19 global health epidemic which has reached the Caribbean within the last few days and a rising food security crisis in East Africa, where swarms of locusts are devouring crops across ten nations and placing some 20 million people at risk of starvation. The full impact of the novel coronavirus outbreak and food shortages on vulnerable populations, including those displaced by conflict, the marginalised and refugees, remains to be seen.

Around the globe, oceans are becoming warmer, winters are getting shorter and summers are growing longer, while the snow cover melts from snow-capped mountains and glaciers disintegrate. In a tech-savvy world of modern information communication technologies (ICTs), networking and sophisticated gadgetry, the basic challenges of ensuring proper nutrition, sourcing clean potable water and accessing safe shelter persist. With an unstinting focus on equality, inclusion, empowerment and sustainability for all, the Commonwealth remains a pinnacle of transformation as it seeks to achieve the kind of dynamic solutions and innovative breakthroughs that these challenges necessitate. Through the launch of strategic initiatives designed to strengthen the economic and developmental prospects of Commonwealth Developing States, the Commonwealth continues to elaborate and expand on critically important mandates emerging from previous summits, including the Commonwealth Connectivity Agenda for Trade and Investment, the Commonwealth Cyber Declaration and the Commonwealth Blue Charter launched at CHOGM 2018.

CHOGM 2020 will once again place the spotlight on people-centred development and the primacy of encouraging, educating and equipping young persons to foster peacebuilding and promote democratic values and principles, despite the social pressures and economic challenges which exist worldwide. Persons under the age of 25 account for approximately 42% of the global population of 7.8 billion people. Recalling the 2013 Magampura Declaration of Commitment to Young People which places youth at the core of sustainable and inclusive development, the Commonwealth will focus anew on empowering and mobilising this demographic to rise to the challenges of the future through transformation, innovation and bridging the digital divide. In this regard, the efforts and initiatives of the Commonwealth Youth Council, the Commonwealth Youth Programme, the Commonwealth Youth Peace Ambassadors Network (CYPAN) and the Commonwealth Youth Sport for Development and Peace Working Group (CYSDP) merit special mention as modalities through which Trinidad and Tobago actively pursues youth development, especially through involvement in youth leadership to shape policy-making and programme delivery.

At the recent 43rd session of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, the Commonwealth engaged in vital dialogue and frontally addressed the issues of access to justice and the strengthening of human rights institutions, calling for greater judicial independence, improved technical capacity in the implementation of human rights standards and reduced financial and bureaucratic hurdles for persons seeking relief and justice from legal, judicial and law enforcement systems. The Commonwealth continues to work assiduously with Member States to promote the rule of law and to bolster the integrity of legal and judicial institutions, anticorruption and good governance through its information campaigns, workshops, publications, online resources and law reform ‘toolkits’.

Following the 2018 launch of the flagship Commonwealth Connectivity Agenda for Trade and Investment, the Commonwealth’s insightful research into the digital economy has revealed the gaps in digital access that exist in high-income and low-income countries and shed light on the predicament of the ‘double digital divide’ that hinders the development of poorer nations and disproportionately affects women. Such research has identified that there are entire cross-sections of societies and communities that are without online information resources and

excluded from the world of electronic finance and electronic banking simply because of lack of access to a mobile device with internet connectivity, thereby obstructing entrepreneurship, self-sufficiency and economic growth and trade. The Commonwealth is seeking to close this gap by creating the legal and regulatory frameworks to facilitate digital trade, training people in science, mathematics and technology, and advancing improved access to the internet through cheaper and more widely available means of access. The Commonwealth's ambitious research suggests that the attainment of 50 percent digital penetration across Commonwealth Member States could increase collective national revenues by some USD 74 billion and such progress could transition Member States into the digitalised era of more modern and efficient technologies i.e. smart technology in fisheries and agriculture, smart e-payment systems and better connections with markets and suppliers, in order to propel sustainable and inclusive economic development.

At CHOGM 2018, the Commonwealth turned attention to strengthening the use of information and communication technologies; enhancing cyber security; protecting the security of networks, data, users and systems; and mitigating threats to the stability and integrity of critical cyber infrastructure through commitments expressed in the Commonwealth Cyber Declaration, as leaders resolved to promote a cyberspace that supports economic and social development and rights online, to build the foundations of an effective national cyber security response, and to foster stability in cyberspace through international cooperation, building on the principles established in the 2014 Commonwealth Cyber Governance Model adopted by the Commonwealth ICT Ministers Forum and the values upheld in the Commonwealth Charter. It is anticipated that CHOGM 2020 will expand these undertakings and build on commitments made to bridge the digital divide and to safeguard Commonwealth citizens' navigation of the cyber domain.

The landmark Commonwealth Blue Charter set the nations of the Commonwealth in the bold and decisive direction of building on the extant corpus of international commitments for ocean conservation, including the first United Nations Oceans Conference, the Caribbean Challenge Initiative, the Barbados Programme of Action, the Mauritius Strategy and the SAMOA Pathway. Commonwealth countries have agreed to cooperate with one another in meeting ocean-related commitments through knowledge transfer and the sharing of expertise and best practices and

to spearhead Action Groups to deal with the specific challenges and threats which impact Member States. Trinidad and Tobago has responded to the call for responsible and sustainable management of oceanic resources by becoming a member of the Blue Charter Action Groups on the Blue Economy; Aquaculture; Ocean and Climate Change; Mangrove Restoration; Marine Plastic Pollution; Ocean Observation; Coral Reef Restoration and Marine Protected Areas, since the objectives and purpose of these groups align with Trinidad and Tobago's National Development Plan 'Vision 2030' and the Sustainable Development Goals. The First Descent Programme is another cutting-edge initiative of the Commonwealth in partnership with the oceanic research body Nekton to conduct multidisciplinary research into unexplored ocean territory. This month, the 'First Descent: Midnight Zone' deepwater exploratory mission was successfully launched in the Indian Ocean to gather data to assist with the marine resource management, protection, conservation and fisheries.

The Commonwealth has been at the forefront of the global movement to address climate change and it advanced the dialogue that led to the Paris Agreement being adopted in December 2015. The Commonwealth has welcomed ratification by all Member States of the Paris Agreement and encouraged countries that have not yet done so to consider ratifying and implementing the Kigali Amendment to the Montreal Protocol and the Doha Amendment to the Kyoto Protocol. Significantly, the Paris Agreement was preceded by the 2015 Commonwealth Heads of Government Statement on Climate Action, which drew upon the '1989 Langkawi Declaration on the Environment' and the '2009 Port of Spain Climate Change Consensus: The Commonwealth Climate Change Declaration'. In keeping with Trinidad and Tobago's National Development Plan 'Vision 2030' and its objective of "Placing the environment at the centre of social and economic development", Trinidad and Tobago ratified the Paris Agreement on February 22, 2018. As part of The Queen's Commonwealth Canopy initiative, Trinidad and Tobago has dedicated the treasured woodlands of the Arena Forest Reserve to this noteworthy forestry conservation project.

At the Twenty-fifth Conference of the Parties (COP25) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in 2019, the Commonwealth maintained a strong presence, seeking to raise ambitions for climate action whilst pushing for concrete responses.

In light of the focus on oceans, land degradation and desertification and the special reports by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) at COP25, the Commonwealth pursued engagement by supporting the climate policy objectives of Member States, as well as promoting and lobbying support for the Commonwealth's work on climate change through collaboration and strengthened partnerships. The Commonwealth also ensured that the concerns of small and vulnerable states were articulated in high-level discussions on climate finance and ocean action. In 2016, the Climate Finance Access Hub was established with modest funding of AUD 1 million and today, with an injection of over GBP 200 million in financing, it serves to remedy the capacity constraints which prevent small and vulnerable states from accessing climate finance by enabling the provision of technical assistance and the transfer of crucial skills and knowledge.

At CHOGM 2020 Rwanda, the Commonwealth will turn its gaze to another dimension of the climate resilience paradigm - the management of landmass, soils and terrain. Having broken ground with the Blue Charter two years ago, the crafting of a proposed Living Lands Charter will aim to integrate climate resilience into the five key areas outlined in Article 5 of the Paris Agreement i.e. agriculture and food security, forests and biodiversity, livestock, water and indigenous knowledge. It is hoped that this thrust towards more sustainable land management will be well received by Commonwealth Heads and will enable the Commonwealth to preserve 25 percent of global landmass occupied by Member States, to curb the loss of arable land and prevent desertification, erosion and other forms of degradation.

This year's theme "Delivering a Common Future: Connecting, Innovating, Transforming" draws attention to the transformative power of the Commonwealth's global engagement in all aspects of society, the bountiful talent, expertise and diversity of the Commonwealth family and its determination to effect meaningful change, produce tangible outcomes and forge practical ties of cooperation and partnership in a spirit of unity and friendship. It recognises the value of the Commonwealth's efforts to not merely connect people, but to elevate and transform their standard of living through innovative institutional and inter-governmental collaboration, education, environmental conservation, economic and trade cooperation, sport and culture, the promotion of democracy, peace and good governance, and active outreach to women, young

people and marginalised groups. The Commonwealth continues to function as a change agent and advocate to influence policy, enrich perspectives, broaden international dialogue in critical focal areas and ultimately, enlarge the scope and impact of key decision-making across a vast array of issues, especially for small and vulnerable states, minorities and the oppressed.

The Commonwealth distinguishes itself as a body which recognises that humanity's fate is inextricably tied to the ability to connect people, to exchange ideas, to learn from lessons and experiences and to collectively discover the potential of unity in diversity. In spite of the crises of the day, the Commonwealth platform continues to provide a space where progress, innovation and transformative approaches to the world's problems can be fleshed out, incubated and nurtured. As we look ahead to CHOGM 2020 in Kigali, let us embrace the endless possibilities that are born of peaceful development, sustainability, fraternal cooperation and a determination to shatter the existing 'glass ceiling' through innovation and transformation, rather than skimming the surface of global issues with disconnected, fragmented and outmoded approaches to address the ills that jeopardise our common future. Reflecting on Commonwealth Day 2020 and 71 years of Commonwealth collaboration, dynamism, advocacy and achievement, may we draw inspiration from two Rwandan proverbs which speak to the vision and path that have been carved by the Commonwealth for its Member States: "The destiny of two fingers is to live together" and "Real fraternity is not about blood, it is about sharing".