

Excerpts of the Opening Speech delivered by his Excellency Arch. Francisco Sesto, Minister of Culture of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela in the XIV Forum of Ministers of Culture and Officials in Charge of Cultural Policies in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Good morning, Dear Friends,

I would like, first of all, to welcome you to Venezuela and thank your Excellencies, Ministers and Vice Ministers of Culture, Secretaries General, Chairpersons of Agencies and other cultural agencies of Latin America and the Caribbean who have kindly accepted to participate in this Forum.

A very special greeting to His Excellency, Mr. Favio Vio, Ambassador of the Republic of Chile in Venezuela. In the same way, I would like to warmly greet His Excellency, Mr. Walter Rubén Hernández, Ambassador of the Republic of Costa Rica in Venezuela, and other special guests and observers.

On my right, Mrs. Silvia Díaz, who is the Chairperson of the National Council for Culture of Venezuela, and whom I will ask to kindly be the moderator for this Forum. Two Vice Ministers of Culture are attending this meeting as well as national cultural authorities, directors, in short, friends in general.

On accepting the venue of this meeting, we wanted to give this 15th Forum a character somewhat different from other similar previous meetings of cultural authorities. As you know, there are three important meetings: one that of the OAS, which is a major meeting of Ministers and High Cultural Authorities, in which the United States and Canada participate, but Cuba doesn't, so the meeting is not complete; there is another important meeting, that of the OEI (Organization of Ibero-American States), but Caribbean countries do not participate in this one, and neither do the United States and Canada, but Spain and Portugal do; and then, there is this one, which I would say, not to lessen the other two which are important, but I would say this the most authentic one, the one that really unites us Latin American and Caribbean countries, this is the one that creates the scenario as it should be in the future, I hope very near future, of what should be that common homeland we want to create for all of us, a Homeland of Homelands.

And as I was saying, we wanted this meeting to be different from other summit conferences, in which one can say things are prearranged and meetings are a mere routine, very formal. Documents and observations are prepared beforehand, and though there is disagreement regarding certain aspects, the haste with which things have to be prepared does not allow debate or deep analysis of issues.

We think this is a timely and excellent opportunity for Ministers and other Higher Cultural Authorities to work as a team, as a group, and discuss some ideas that could be very useful for our work.

The changes that have occurred in Latin America and the Caribbean are not changes that can occur in just one country. We must see things through a continental perspective, and have an overall comprehensive view of our region, or we will not be like a great family, as brethren in the great homeland so that, independent from our own cosmovision, we can fulfill our duty and our responsibility of creating a great brotherhood, a great working team. It is not important if we speak English or French or variants of those two languages, or if we speak Portuguese, or if we speak Spanish, or if we speak any of the many Indigenous Languages. In Venezuela there are 35 Indigenous Languages that are now official languages in their respective communities thanks to the Bolivarian Constitution. And how many Indigenous Languages are there in Latin America?

Our peoples must be integrated, united; our peoples must constitute a great Homeland. It is obvious the world is organizing itself into blocks, the United States, for example, is a nation born from the union of several states, in a way, and that is why it is called United States.

In the case of Europe, in spite of the two so-called "world" wars that were in fact wars caused by the contradictions between European countries, contradictions of European capitalism, and in particular two very strong antagonists in those wars were Germany and France. However, they have been wise enough to put aside differences and painful memories and have become almost a nation of several states.

Thus, the world is organizing into blocks, and there are forces alien to us, alien to Latin America and the Caribbean that have tried to prevent us from uniting, that have tried to not to favor integration. Independence fighters had a very clear idea about the issue of integration. In the case of Venezuela, Bolívar and another hero precursor of our Independence, General Francisco de Miranda, emphasized the integration of our countries, but were not able to implement it. So we have a two-hundred year old debt and we must work towards it. In my opinion, our presidents, our parliament members, our intellectuals, not only recently, but for centuries, have been striving for integration, though it has been extremely difficult to make it come true. As I see it, there is a strong movement towards economic integration, and progress is being made in this direction. For example, there is integration in the area of energy with Petrosur, and Petrocaribe, and there is progress also with regards to MERCOSUR and several other communities, the South American community and CARICOM in various ways of integration.

Also in the political arena there has been some integration: there is a Latin American Parliament, for example. And there are agreements regarding customs duties, visas, circulation of commodities and travels, and always, or almost always, talks on integration end with the phrase "The most important thing is, of course, cultural integration." Usually presidents, politicians, parliament members, artists, intellectuals, say that cultural integration is of the utmost importance. But that's all. They don't go further, perhaps because cultural integration is not an easy task. There are physical problems, there are tall mountains, there are oceans separating us, there is the jungle. We are separated from Brazil, for example, by the Amazon jungle. And there is a real need of physical infrastructure, roads, highways and the like to communicate, to integrate. In the case of the Caribbean, to be able to fly to any Caribbean island close to our shores, sometimes we have to fly to Miami, in the United States first, and then take a flight to the island. So, a one-hour or an hour and a half trip becomes a six or seven hour trip. It's a problem, a physical problem, because even though our hearts and our souls are very close, and we have the same or very similar problems and hopes, we must find ways and formulas so that integration is no longer a demand and mere official rhetoric. In my view, we must find formulas and it is a responsibility of our positions, we must find formulas to make the integration of our peoples a dream come true.

It is good that our governments find ways and formulas for integration. Right now, we are here in a Forum which is a way of integration. And we have attended previous Forums, and we have met each other in previous Forums in the past. But that's not important in my opinion. What is really important, in my view is the integration of our peoples. And when I say integration, I mean that our peoples get to know each other, and that through that mutual knowledge expand and strengthen relationships between our peoples, and above all, and that's what brings us here, an issue common to all of us, the issue of cultural diversity. And it is important because our nature, our vision of the world, our way of understanding the world, our way of relating to one another in society and in communities that are threatened by what richer and more developed countries call *entertainment industries*, which are very strong and that have settled in our countries, controlling between 80 percent and 90 percent of international television, cinema and music.

Another problem is we don't have common publishing systems. Our publishing systems are in general very limited, but let me talk about the big, powerful ones, the publishing systems from Argentina and Mexico. These have also been cornered and harassed, they don't have the power they used to have. We could nourish ourselves with the works published by Argentina, Mexico, Uruguay, and Colombia in some way, but now it is reduced and diminished. The music industry is still strong, it is still

present, but there are problems also. Trust me, I am telling you, not as a Minister, but as a citizen of this continent. There are many problems, and we have a painstaking task in front of us: we must find ways and formulas, novel formulas and not rhetoric ways for integration.

When looking at the agenda, I would like you to notice that there are not that many items in it. It's as if we were having just an informal meeting, a friends' meeting which could be somewhat disorganized, but the real intention is having a meeting in which we can be extremely open and honest, and spill out what we have inside us, beyond any differences or views we can have at some point. Our visions and opinions can be different, or they can vary slightly at some point or in some aspects; or our governments might implement different methods to solve a problem. But beyond those, I would say minor differences, the aspects and issues that connect us and join us are too important. Because we are close in memory and in history and also in geography. And our peoples are also close in their struggles and their demands for justice, equality and in the fight against poverty. Our peoples do not deserve living in poverty as they do. No, we do not deserve such poverty.

Therefore, I would urge you to forget about the formalities of your positions, it is not important if we have a document or not at the end of this meeting, for most of the times, documents are only a formality. In the two and half years I have been Minister of Culture, I have lost count of the Declarations I have signed or endorsed, and people get very anxious about a certain paragraph, or certain phrase. But in the end, the document is left there, just one more paper, a report forgotten in a drawer. That's not what we would like. The important thing is not the "declaration". What is really important is that this time, in this meeting, we have a dialogue a very open and frank conversation to build bridges and relationships which would be much more interesting and beneficial and intense that what we have had until now. Sometimes a Venezuelan music band goes to a certain country, or an orchestra visits another country, or a theater group performs, or we publish a translation of the work of a certain Caribbean author; sometimes we visit each other, we do things, but it is not enough. We really have to find ways. Of course, this can't be achieved overnight, we have to weave and build, and it is the responsibility of us government officials, on behalf of our peoples, to build this great homeland.

To conclude, I would like to thank you once again for participating in this meeting, and we hope that this Summit, this small Summit of Ministers and Highest Authorities is not just one more meeting; I hope we can find the true meaning of these meetings, because sometimes people are skeptic about the possible results of this kind of meetings.

Thank you.