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Powell Says the Summit of the Americas Will Make Life Better

Op-ed column by U.S. Secretary of State

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Summit of the Americas Will Make Life Better

By Colin L. Powell

At the Quebec Summit of the Americas in 2001, the democratically elected leaders of the Western Hemisphere pledged "to strengthen representative democracy, promote good governance and protect human rights and fundamental freedoms."

They also determined to "create greater prosperity and expand economic opportunities while fostering social justice and the realization of human potential." Since then, our governments have been working together to meet those goals, and we have made progress. But we have much more to do.

Many countries have faced severe economic, political or social crises in recent years. Poverty remains unacceptably high and growth unacceptably low in too many places. Democratic institutions in much of the hemisphere remain weak and in need of reform.

To continue the work begun in Quebec, President Bush and his fellow leaders of the Americas are meeting this week in Monterrey, Mexico. The Monterrey summit's agenda includes stimulating economic growth, promoting good governance, fighting corruption and investing in people, especially in education and health.

The summit's overarching aim is to reinvigorate our collaboration by setting practical goals that rapidly can improve the daily lives of people in the region. To encourage broad-based growth, we will help small businessmen, farmers and working families.

Small and medium-sized businesses account for 80 percent of the economic activity in Latin America and the Caribbean and generate 60 percent of all jobs. We seek to reduce or remove altogether the obstacles to starting a small business and to increase the availability of capital for business start-ups and expansions.

We will aid small farmers by ensuring they have clear legal title to their land and greater access to credit based on that equity. We will make the sending of remittances from those working abroad both easier and less expensive. We also will bring financial services to working families. In short, our aim is to make the free-market system work fairly for all of the region's citizens.

At the summit, we also will press for agreement to improve the region's schools and health care systems. Even the best school systems in Latin America and the Caribbean rank in the bottom quarter in worldwide tests. That is unacceptable.

Our children need a high-quality education to succeed in a 21st-century economy. If we don't find the resources to invest in that education today, we will pay a far higher toll in lost earnings and lower living standards tomorrow. As a first step, we will urge our partners to draft well-defined educational standards and to institute regular testing to monitor progress.

Finally, we can't ignore the public health challenge that is hard upon us. HIV/AIDS is a major threat in the Americas today, with nearly 3 million people in the region already infected.

Mr. Bush's \$15 billion Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, the Global Fund to Fight HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, and other U.S. assistance will bolster the region's health care systems. But just as important, we will urge our partners to undertake a comprehensive program to stop the spread of HIV/AIDS, because our help with resources alone can't do the job.

We want all the people of the Americas to grow together in peace and freedom. To achieve that, it isn't enough that politicians and diplomats pledge and pontificate.

The Monterrey summit must create real opportunities for people to improve their lives. That ultimately is the test that the Summit of the Americas must pass, and we are doing all we can to ensure it does so.

(Colin L. Powell is the U.S. Secretary of State.)