I am delighted to be here with you at this sixth meeting on international humanitarian assistance mechanisms in Latin America and the Caribbean -- the first to be held in the Caribbean region. My thanks to Jamaica for hosting us, and joining Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, Ecuador and Panama in organizing this annual gathering. This meeting has grown in importance given the economic, social and human impact for the region and the steps which are being taken by Governments, civil society and people themselves to tackle these issues.

We know that this is a region which is not uniform. Countries have very different levels of economic and social growth, some with high levels of inequality and hidden poverty. It is also a region that has a lot to teach the world about disaster risk reduction, emergency response and coordinated humanitarian action. This is a region of innovation and growth.

This is also a region where the cost of disasters is increasing rapidly. Loss of life and some of these costs are more intangible in terms of the impact on communities, on social cohesion. But the economic impact is also very high. In 2012, largely to Hurricane Sandy, the Americas region suffered more damage and economic losses from disasters and emergencies than all the other regions of the world combined.

However, in most years, the majority of the disasters that strike Latin American and Caribbean countries are small or medium-sized events that don’t attract global attention but erode the resilience and coping strategies of communities and countries, because they have no time to recover, to draw breath. The World Bank estimates that unless preventive measures are put in place, disasters could cost the region over $2 billion dollars annually.

Latin American and Caribbean Governments, civil society, NGOs and businesses are playing a bigger and bigger role in humanitarian action, in the region but also in the world. Regional organizations are a driving force here, creating strong strategic frameworks and ensuring that the contributions and strengths of the countries in the region and its people are coordinated with our international efforts.
Over the years, initiatives that began here at the MIAH have played a part in strengthening coordination structures through operational guidelines, systems and protocols for Governments, intergovernmental organizations, NGOs and the private sector; building partnerships and helping to ensure that their respective roles and mandates complement each other. All essential to ensure that we maximize the impact of our actions.

Examples include the legal instruments created and adapted by Colombia, Peru, Haiti and Guatemala that regulate international assistance in disasters; Costa Rica’s work as the regional president of INSARAG, to promote coordination and standards on search and rescue through regional simulations in Mexico and Peru; and the signing of the San José Declaration by Presidents of seven Central American countries earlier this year, agreeing to develop the mobilization of international humanitarian assistance between their countries.

More broadly, there has been enormous progress on preparedness and regional response in the past six years.

In 2010, every country in the region was a donor to humanitarian action in Haiti, reinforcing the principle that friends and neighbours who know the terrain and can get help in quickly are the most effective first responders, when national emergency response systems are overwhelmed.

There is a strong logistics capacity across the region, with a regional hub under construction in Panama. And in Central America there have been simulation exercises on response to natural disasters with Member States.

Risk reduction strategies are being employed in major cities and there has been pioneering use of innovative approaches including cash transfers.

The rapid evaluation and analysis of humanitarian needs is reinforced by the information sharing system RedHum, which played an important part in managing information and mobilizing more than $6 million dollars of assistance for the 360,000 people who were affected by the rainy season throughout the region in 2012.

And the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency, CDEMA, has been a model for the region in creating frameworks and working groups for coordinated action among its members.

The MIAH gives us all an opportunity to recognize, but also to reflect on what has been done, to learn from experience and to form and strengthen new and innovative partnerships.

This includes the work being done by NGOs and the private sector on insurance and risk analysis, for example by Zurich Insurance and the Red Cross; and projects between humanitarian agencies and cellphone companies on communicating with disaster-affected communities, in Haiti and elsewhere.

The corporate sector is beginning to play an important role across this region. Agreements with companies including DHL and Ericsson have benefitted humanitarian response through logistics support and communications services. There are clear areas of common interest between Governments, humanitarian relief agencies, NGOs and private companies, and we need to build on these efforts, particularly in the areas of communications and crisis mapping to identify needs more quickly and target our assistance efforts.

The mission of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) is to mobilize and coordinate effective and principled humanitarian action in partnership with national and international actors.
But we cannot be complacent. This region faces two specific and serious challenges: the effects of climate change, and rapid urbanization.

Latin American and Caribbean countries are responsible for a small fraction of global emissions, but if global temperatures continue to rise there will be increased flooding and droughts, a reduction in the amount of arable land for cultivation and an increase in the number and intensity of extreme weather events. That is why Governments and inter-governmental organizations must develop common strategies that support the building of resilience of communities, that is, the ability to withstand and cope with shocks.

It is the poorest people who will suffer the worst consequences of climate change. Making sure that the poorest communities are included in the development of risk reduction strategies and that their preparedness and response mechanisms are strengthened will continue to be a major challenge. For some reason we still continue to see most money channeled into response rather than prevention, even though we know that investing in $1 dollar of prevention saves seven later on.

Our experience in Haiti and elsewhere shows we are not always adequately prepared to respond in urban settings. We must build on the work that is underway on urban risk reduction in Mexico City, Lima and elsewhere, developing plans and protocols and conducting simulations of large-scale urban disaster.

And there are other challenges too: how do we deal with the escalating humanitarian consequences of urban violence? How do we work with vulnerable groups of people, including the elderly and the disabled?

And we need to think about how we can use the huge increases in the number of cell phones and internet users in this region -- 98% of people have some kind of access to a cell phone -- both for early warning networks but also to get feedback on our work, even though some of that feedback is not always complementary. We can focus and target more through crowdsourcing, through the use of mobile cash delivery, and by communicating instantly with those needing help.

Before I end, I want to touch on the global humanitarian situation which we face, and which in the past year and a half has been dominated by the crisis in Syria, and in the region overall.

In Syria, more than 100,000 people have already died. 6.8 million people are in urgent need of help and 2 million refugees are being hosted in neighbouring countries, putting a strain on their economies, on their social services, and also on the relationships between people in those countries. It’s a crisis of extreme brutality and the costs are enormous. A generation of Syria’s children have been traumatized. They are now lost, they are living in camps without education, homeless. We see sectarian violence on the rise day by day. And the costs are huge. We asked for $4.4 billion dollars this year, which is why reaching a political solution to this crisis is so critical and so urgent.

But we can’t let this overshadow all of our other work. We can’t allow it to suck all the resources out of our system. We must continue to work together, consider how best we can all make a contribution to ensuring greater peace, security and stability in our world.

The mission of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) is to mobilize and coordinate effective and principled humanitarian action in partnership with national and international actors.
And that is why the announcement that we will have a World Humanitarian Summit in 2016 is so important and so opportune. The next two years are crucial in the run-up to that Summit. It is not an intergovernmental process, it is about bringing together all of our key stakeholders, people affected by disasters, governments, civil society, the private sector, UN organizations and others. We want to look at humanitarian aid effectiveness, at the impact of conflict in our world, of innovation and how we can use it more, and work on the crucial issues around resilience, disaster risk reduction and preparedness. We will have a series of regional consultations across the world and they are absolutely key, because that’s where we will identify not only the challenges we face, but some of the solutions to meeting those challenges. And I hope that you will all participate.

Thank you all very much indeed for being here.

The strength of MIAH rests on its action-oriented approach; the focus on delivering results. I look forward to our continued discussion, to hearing more about the conclusions over the last two days of work; you have worked extremely hard.

And to making sure that working together, we continue to make a real difference in our world.

Thank you very much.