Excellencies,
Ministers,
Colleagues,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Buenos Dias.

It’s a great pleasure to be here today at this fifth meeting on enhancing humanitarian partnerships in the Latin America and Caribbean region.

I would particularly like to thank the Panama authorities for organizing this meeting, and their predecessors in Mexico, Brazil, Argentina and Ecuador who hosted previous meetings. I would like to thank Minister Henriquez and Mr. Tomas Guardia from Panama’s Foreign Ministry for helping to organize and shape this event. Their hard work and commitment have made today possible.

I must also thank the MIAH follow-up group – Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador and Mexico – for all of their work on the plan of action and outcomes of the meetings. These dedicated efforts turn your words and ideas into achievements.

After five years, the MIAH is now a well-established annual event.

Together we have strengthened national, regional and international coordination by establishing partnership and cooperation between the region and with UN-OCHA;

You have provided guidance for governments in preparedness and response;

You have broadened participation by fostering alliances with the private sector, with civil societies and with beneficiaries,

You have worked on transparency and accountability in mobilizing resources;

You have upgraded information management through promoting and developing systems and tools including Redhum – the regional platform for humanitarian information.

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I think it is important and I commend you fully on all of these achievements.

This year’s meeting is stepping up the level of political engagement, with the addition of this Ministerial Segment and the preparation of a Plan of Action to set the framework for greater collaboration in the future.

This year is also a landmark for my own office, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, which was set up twenty years ago by the General Assembly of the United Nations to improve the international disaster response in both natural and man-made emergencies.

The world, including this region, has come a very long way in those twenty years.

Our collective humanitarian work in the Latin American and Caribbean region, as everyone here knows, is largely focused on disaster prevention and relief.

The Latin American and Caribbean region has seen great progress on many fronts over the past decade. Several countries have become regular providers of international assistance – including Panama, which has donated to the Central Emergency Relief Fund.

But high levels of vulnerability remain, partly due to the effects of climate change, which tends to increase the damage caused by droughts, floods and landslides. These hazards are likely to continue and even increase and they pose a particular threat to the estimated 180 million people living in poverty, particularly in poor housing in newly-urbanized and marginalized areas of major cities.

This region is also hit by what we call “silent” emergencies: recurrent minor disasters that are not covered by the international media but which erode resilience, exacerbate social and economic inequalities, hamper the solution of basic problems and put more people at risk. And of course they are not minor disaster to the people affected. The economic effects of one hurricane season, in 2006, have been compared to the Asian tsunami – but without the mobilization of resources on a similar scale.

The disaster risk that many countries in this region face means that we must work together to be prepared for, and respond to, disasters that exceed a nation’s short-term response capacity.

In the past six years, staff in the UN Disaster Assessment and Coordination teams and staff from OCHA’s Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean have been mobilized to more than 30 emergencies to support humanitarian coordination. Since 2007, there have been around 12 requests per year for international assistance in the region, and a total of 13 flash appeals and three consolidated appeals over that period. This year alone, OCHA staff have been deployed to El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua after the floods in the aftermath of Tropical Depression 12-E.

Our staff in the region are also helping to raise awareness in the international community of the region’s needs; providing in-country training and advice, and supporting the crucial work of the many other regional organizations working here on disaster

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preparedness and response. All these are examples of the positive impact of our enhanced partnership.

Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I believe we are now beginning a new era in emergency response: an era in which it is generally recognised that the most effective and efficient response starts well before an emergency.

This requires building resilient systems: that is, policies and frameworks that support nations and communities. It requires a cultural shift away from a reactive approach to a pro-active stance that considers the interconnections between preparation, response, mitigation and recovery.

We are all very familiar with the international coordination that follows a natural catastrophe, when it is apparent that multiple teams on the ground need a central organizing hub to divide responsibilities and avoid duplication.

What is not so obvious is that coordination is just as important in preparing for disaster response.

Deciding on strategy and policy to promote predictable action; sharing information; sharing resources; monitoring and evaluating results: all elements benefit from local, national, regional and international input.

We in the multi-lateral humanitarian system are starting to grasp a fundamental change in the paradigm of disaster response. National disaster management capacity and become stronger in every region of the world, and perhaps here, more than most. The multi-lateral system, which I coordinate is adapting to this new reality; recognizing the natural lead role of national response, and reorienting itself accordingly to work in this context.

This means that our main role is now in helping to support to fill gaps in government-led responses and preparedness, on the basis of shared analysis and planning. When we seek to trigger our classic coordination tools, like flash appeals, it is with this perspective in mind; to get ready to do our part to support the national effort.

And I of course count on your support in such situations, and I hope that your governments will support multi-lateral humanitarian action in other regions where it is needed. Financial contributions are, of course welcome, for important humanitarian efforts in protracted emergencies like those in Sudan, the Horn of Africa, or Yemen. All of these are efforts which depend on voluntary contributions.

Multi-lateral humanitarian funding from government in this region has become increasingly important.

But, your substantive support is just as important in the fora that govern the multi-lateral system, to ensure that we continue to have the mandate and capacity to help people in need with impartiality and with humanity.

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This region is rich in many ways, you have an array of regional organizations. There are several different bodies working on different areas of humanitarian response including the Andean Committee for Disaster Prevention and Relief (CAPRADE); the Central American Integration System (SICA), the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency (CDEMA), the Pan American Health Organization as well as many others.

The growth of these organizations is a great success for the region. It also offers opportunity to reinforce coordination and cooperation between these bodies. These meetings, and the networks and relationships that are fostered here, are an important part of building and reinforcing the foundations of our emergency response efforts.

This forum is an opportunity to meet and talk on many different levels: national, bilateral, sub-regional, regional and international.

But we are not here simply as representatives of national, regional or international groups. Today, we are one group: the group of humanitarians.

And I am confident that this meeting is going to move forward your agenda significantly.

We stands ready to support all of you in establishing the tools and services that must be in place to ensure government can provide people with life-saving relief and protection.

I and the OCHA team look forward to working with you as we move forward on your Action Plan, for the next five years and beyond.

Thank you.