

**Joint Global Update by
the Prime Minister of Barbados and
the Secretary-General of UNCTAD
December 11, 2020**

Statement by Prime Minister the Hon. Mia Amor Mottley, Q.C., M.P.

Secretary-General Kituyi, my brother,

I am pleased to be able to meet with you again, if only virtually, and, regrettably, for reasons that we both hoped could have been avoided. I also welcome today's opportunity to speak directly to Member States, UNCTAD Secretariat officials, and indeed the media – but also to the people of Barbados. I think it is important that we bring you fully up to date on the latest developments on what could perhaps best be described as the rollercoaster ride on the way to UNCTAD 15.

As you are all aware, it was back in June 2019 that the Trade and Development Board first accepted the offer of the Government of Barbados to host the 15th Session of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. It seems like almost a lifetime ago, given that everything that has happened since then has consumed us, as you know. At the time, my Government enthusiastically embraced the challenge of becoming the smallest member state ever to hold an UNCTAD Session. Our national planning structure was fully deployed by the beginning of 2020, and the Host Country and UNCTAD Secretariat Organising Teams immediately began to coordinate their efforts on both sides of the Atlantic.

And then oops! Up comes COVID-19. By March, we were all in various stages of lockdown, and by April, as you recall, Secretary-General, you and I consulted and we accepted the disappointing reality that it would be impossible to proceed as normal. We recognised then that there was no immediate remedy to the disruption the pandemic was causing to global travel, as well as to the substantive negotiating process in Geneva. People were consumed with other things. Accordingly, on April 24th we jointly announced that UNCTAD 15 could no longer take place from October 18th to 23rd, 2020, as had been originally scheduled.

We were however hopeful that by the end of the summer the pandemic would begin to recede. And so, after careful consideration and consultation between ourselves and the UNCTAD membership, we agreed to reschedule to the new dates of the 25th to the 30th of April, 2021. On August 5th, when we announced the rescheduled timing, I told you that we remained positive that by next year the determined efforts of world scientists and the prudent precautionary measures we were putting in place would help to make the convening of UNCTAD 15 a reality.

We were certainly not wrong about the determined efforts of world scientists, whose progress on the development, testing and delivery of the vaccines has been nothing short of phenomenal. We were, however, perhaps a little too optimistic about **exactly when** in 2021 a COVID-safe global environment would emerge. We were certainly in no position, at that stage, to foresee the virulence of the second wave of infections that would sweep through Europe and North America as winter approached. We see it before our very eyes on a daily basis.

Still, we at the Barbados end did not lose faith, and we continued to project and to have contingency plans for the April date, waiting for a silver lining to emerge from the clouds. Our reality as a small tropical island with limited ports of entry has been far different from what many others have been facing. The overwhelming majority of our population, thankfully – and I thank Barbadians again – have heeded the COVID-19 protocols to wear masks and to sanitise, as well as to social distance. As a consequence, the country has managed to remain out of lockdown since the 15th of June of this year. I thank the disciplined and responsible attitude of Barbadians and I thank the diligent monitoring and those who have gone way beyond the call of duty in our health sector and our border authorities. There has been to date, as a result, no community spread within our country. Indeed, the handful of imported cases that are registered every week, are rapidly detected through mandatory testing, particularly our second test, and our quarantine facilities, and immediately, if necessary, placed into isolation at designated facilities.

We were therefore confident that, once we continued the strict enforcement of our protocols, Barbados could create a secure biosphere from airport to

hotels and ultimately to the Conference venues. This would have allowed us to host UNCTAD 15 in a manner that would have minimised the risk to the health and safety of visiting delegates and indeed to Barbadians alike. We immediately set out to explore a range of innovative possibilities with our tourism and our health officials, with this objective in mind.

Yet, despite our best efforts, the second wave of COVID-19 infections has grown more intense and more deadly in hotspots across the globe. It became increasingly apparent that, however safe we believed Barbados to be, and however much effort we put into keeping it so, as we are doing, this could not of itself motivate participants to travel to our country in the numbers to transact the important business of UNCTAD 15 in a meaningful way; that is: through fully participatory, in person sessions – face-to-face. Nor could we, simply by wishful thinking, counteract the apparent deficit in the substantive preparatory process at the Geneva end, where progress has been severely impacted by the continual lockdowns and by the difficulties of pursuing intense negotiations in six languages across a virtual platform. We need to have taken that into account.

We all accept that for UNCTAD 15 to be successful it must have strong levels of in-person attendance in Barbados, and equally strong policy proposals that would form the basis for deliberation and action by our Ministers. At this juncture, we have regrettably concluded that neither can be guaranteed in time for April, 2021.

We have recently also been advised of a crucial fact that is beyond the control of the host country, namely: that if UNCTAD 15 is convened in April 2021 in the manner and the scope originally planned, it would be categorised as high risk by the Occupational Safety and Health Office of the United Nations. We have been assured that this classification is in no way determined by the COVID-19 profile of Barbados, but rather by the possible dangers posed to the local population, the incoming participants and the UNCTAD staff from the influx of several thousand participants from multiple locations across the globe. This means, in effect, that we could only proceed under UN guidelines which would reduce permitted physical attendance at the Conference to such low numbers and such low levels as to seriously compromise its viability and its ultimate success.

Given this unfortunate reality, the Secretary-General and I have come to the difficult conclusion that we have no choice but to seek a further postponement of UNCTAD 15. As host country, my Government does not wish to put at risk the momentum that has been generated thus far by the preparatory process in Barbados, nor, indeed, the excellent ideas produced by our lead organisers for the six forums that we have planned as the major side events. We especially do not wish to dampen the enthusiasm and involvement, and investment, of the people of Barbados in this important endeavour. At the same time, however, we are agreed, all of us, that we cannot plan effectively in an environment of uncertainty. The new dates we select should therefore be in a timeframe that we can reasonably expect to be COVID-safe, based on the best available expert projections to date for the uptake of vaccines over the coming months.

With these considerations in mind, my friends, and after a review of the crowded calendar of international meetings now scheduled or indeed rescheduled for 2021, the Secretary-General and I have agreed to propose that UNCTAD 15 should now take place in Barbados from **Sunday October 3rd to Friday October 8th, 2021, with pre-events starting from Friday October 1st**. We are confident that, given these unprecedented circumstances, Member States will give us their support for the convening of the Conference on these new dates, and that we can count on their full and active participation in October next year in Barbados.

My country remains fully committed to fulfilling its responsibilities as the host country of UNCTAD 15. I cannot deny that planning this event in the throes of a global health and economic emergency has been a logistical nightmare for both of our teams. Yet, like with all things, we must persist, and we shall persist. And we shall prevail. As I said to you in August, this crisis provides us with an unprecedented opportunity, through bold and decisive leadership, to make UNCTAD 15 a transformational Conference with transformational outcomes. Indeed, I truly believe that the moment is **now** for UNCTAD, with its unique history in support of developing countries, to step up to take its place at the forefront of new and serious efforts to rethink the development paradigm. I have been speaking about it for the better part of the last year. Now is the time for radical transformation of the decades-old assumptions

that have hitherto underpinned the international economic order - an order that, as I have said before, persists more to perpetuate inequalities than to serve the critical needs of too many of us across the global community. Institutions that existed, now, that when they were formed our countries did not even exist in many instances. And therefore the reality and perspective that we must reflect upon as we move beyond the third decade of the Twenty First Century has to, literally, reflect our circumstances, our needs, and our deep concern about the unjust inequalities that grip our world today.

We believe that moral and ethical leadership must matter, and that we must work together. And if we can work together in the vein of moral and ethical leadership, as committed leaders, then I truly believe that we can be the difference that the world is crying out for at this stage.

I thank you all and I look forward to engaging with you soon again on the road to Barbados in October 2021. We shall make it and we shall get there.

Thank you.