Communication of the Chairman of the Commission (Colombia)

For Colombia, it is a pleasure to have the opportunity to once again chair the meeting of the Regional Commission for the Americas of the World Tourism Organization, this time in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, a setting that reminds us of the importance of the Caribbean Sea for many of our peoples and leads us to reflect upon the diversity of cultures, languages, cuisine, climate and destinations which our region has to offer to tourists from around the world.

Let us take a moment to recall the main figures of the tourism sector to date, and highlight its importance in the economic growth of countries. According to data provided by the UNWTO, the tourism sector accounts for 9% of global GDP, 6% of world trade, 30% of worldwide exports in services and generates 1 of every 11 jobs. For the Americas, the outlook is even more encouraging if one considers that in 2014 we posted growth of 7.4%, above the world average which stood at 4.7%.

The situation is likewise positive in the case of Colombia. In 2014 we received foreign exchange earnings of USD 4.98 billion and more than 4 million foreign visitors, thus making the tourism sector the country’s third largest foreign exchange earner today, after oil and coal.

Sustaining these positive growth trends means that, in each of our countries, we need to maintain the commitments undertaken in areas such as tourism quality and safety in our destinations, and making tourist satisfaction and protection the number one goal. In this regard, I would like to mention the important results obtained in the framework of the event “Excellence in Tourism Destination Quality” held in San Salvador de Jujuy, Argentina, where various experts of the sector put forward the proposal to form a coordination body led by the Themis Foundation, which is to address issues such as the adoption of tourism quality standards, mutual recognition of certification processes and national brands, training and capacity building, among others. This proposal was reiterated by the Vice-Ministry of Tourism of Colombia through a letter sent to the UNWTO Themis Foundation in recent days.

We must continue the work begun in equally important areas such as travel facilitation, which should be linked to strategies for reducing and eliminating administrative procedures for obtaining visas as well as tourist safety, based on shared information systems, making use of new technologies applied to the sector. Our goal should be to promote the safe passage of tourists between our countries, in order to
increase flows, lengthen stays, and ensure that that the contribution made by travellers to local economies continues to grow.

If we manage to eliminate the barriers to the free movement of people, it will be much easier for everyone to advance towards the creation of multideestination products, which will undoubtedly be a positive factor for attracting tourists, contribute to the regional development of tourism competitiveness, and constitute an excellent promotional tool.

As proof of this we can refer to the various achievements we have made in the Pacific Alliance: how the number of Colombian tourist arrivals in Mexico has increased by 100% to date, since the elimination of the visa requirement, and how Mexico is one of the fastest-growing source markets for Colombia. I can also tell you that the 1st Tourism Matchmaking Forum of the Pacific Alliance resulted in 1,745 meetings and an expected business volume of USD15,961,480. We confirmed that although the Alliance aims to capture markets on the other side of Pacific, we also have great opportunities to seize at the intraregional level.

Before concluding my speech, I wish to reiterate the cordial invitation for all of you to gather together from 12 to 17 September and allow us the honour of being your hosts at the 21st session of the UNWTO General Assembly in Medellín, which aside from being known as the City of Eternal Spring, has been recognized as the most innovative city. Aside from such notable tourist attractions as the Botanical Garden and its Orquideorama, the Parque Explora with its aquarium, and the heightened sensory experience of the Parque de los Pies Descalzos (Barefoot Park), it also has the most complete collection of the works of Fernando Botero, the Medellín-born master painter and sculptor, whose “fat” figures are on display all over the world. Medellín has diversified its tourism offerings with products that highlight traditional Colombian culture, such as the Feria de las Flores (Flower Festival), or the modern expressions of contemporary art and urban design for social integration. As a destination for meetings, it annually hosts world-class events, and in nature tourism it features the Arví Ecotourism Park, which has been certified according to Colombia’s industry standard for the sustainability of tourism destinations. These are the reasons why Medellín is a must-see destination in the country of Magical Realism.

To conclude, I hope that this meeting of the Regional Commission for the Americas results in great contributions to strengthening the institutional management of tourism in our countries.