Permanent Mission of Barbados to the United Nations

STATEMENT BY

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ON

BEHALF OF THE CARIBBEAN COMMUNITY (CARICOM)

ON

AGENDA ITEM 65
PROMOTION AND PROTECTION OF THE RIGHTS OF CHILDREN

OF THE

68TH SESSION OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

OCTOBER 16, 2013

United Nations Headquarters
New York

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Mr. Chairman,

I am honoured to speak on behalf of the fourteen Member States of the Caribbean Community, (CARICOM) on agenda item 65, Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Children. I wish to congratulate you and the other members of the Bureau on your election and to assure you of CARICOM’s full support and cooperation during this session.

CARICOM aligns itself with the statement delivered by the distinguished representative of Cuba on behalf of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States. We also wish to thank the Secretary General for the reports before the Committee on this agenda item.

Mr Chairman,

The most fleeting perusal of media reports reveals that the promotion and protection of the rights of the child, in far too many societies, in far too many circumstances, and far too often, is not always a priority. Children continue to be the victims of physical and psychological abuse; to be subjected to sexual violence; to be trafficked, prostituted and otherwise
exploited for commercial gain; to be recruited as child soldiers; to be denied the opportunity to enjoy basic rights such as the right to education, health, water, food and sanitation, and the most fundamental right, the right to life. Girl children continue to be more vulnerable.

Mr Chairman,

The common experience of slavery and colonization in the Caribbean region contributed to the prioritization of human development and the reduction of poverty. Decades of investment in such areas as free or low-cost education, good-quality and accessible healthcare, in some cases free of cost, have borne fruit in terms of low child and maternal mortality rates, universal primary and secondary education, and literate and educated citizens. Cognizant that the earliest years provide a unique window for child development, early childhood education is being provided or expanded in the region’s territories. We have made remarkable strides.

But we are in a new era. Challenges, some new, some which have plagued the region for some time, and which hinder the full enjoyment of the rights of the child, confront us and demand to be addressed.
Violence against children

Mr Chairman,

Violence against children is a violation of their human rights. The Secretary-General’s study on violence against children confirms that such violence exists in every country of the world, transcending culture, class, education, income and ethnic origin. In every region, in contradiction to human rights obligations and children’s developmental needs, violence against children is sanctioned, or tolerated, in societal norms and values that often disregard child rights.

The report of the Secretary-General on the status of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, contained in document 68/257, indicates that progress made globally in ending all forms of violence against children remains uneven. Actions taken by states are characterized by uncoordinated policy interventions, dispersed and ill-enforced legislation, and based on scarce data and research.
Violence against children in the Caribbean took centre stage at the 23rd meeting of CARICOM's Council for Human and Social Development in July 2012, which was devoted to children and youth. There, it was noted that while some progress had been made, significant work remained to be done in protecting the region's children. There is an absolute need for CARICOM to continue to assess the gaps in realizing child rights, and to implement, monitor and evaluate programmes aimed at filling those gaps, in order to advance the promotion and fulfilment of child rights.

Sexual violence against children is a particularly heinous violation of the rights of the child, causing irreparable psychological and physical damage. It is insidious, shrouded in silence and secrecy, often enabled by cultural norms which disregard the rights of children and allow perpetrators to enjoy high levels of impunity. The vulnerability and young age of the victims create favourable conditions for predators, making it far more likely that the abuse remains undetected, or continues for some time before detection. Child sexual abuse is under-reported, and sexual violence against boys, even more so.
The urgent need to continue addressing this issue led to the convening of the *Conference on Combating Sexual Violence against Children in the Caribbean*, in Bridgetown, Barbados, in December 2012. The conference reviewed progress made since the Secretary-General’s 2006 *Study on Violence against Children*, and adopted the *Bridgetown Declaration and Agenda for Action to combat child sexual abuse in the Caribbean*.

In the Declaration, participating representatives of governments, civil society, academia, religious institutions, law enforcement and the legal community, renewed their commitment to accelerate and intensify efforts to combat and eliminate child sexual abuse in the Caribbean.

The December Conference was also the platform for the simultaneous launch of the UNICEF *Break the Silence* initiative, aimed at protecting children from sexual abuse and the risk of HIV.

Despite daunting challenges, CARICOM remains committed to continuing regional action to combat violence against children.
Youth crime and violence

Mr Chairman,

The children and youth of the Caribbean have become increasingly involved in crime and violence, as both victims and perpetrators, and youth crime and violence have reached alarming levels. Much of the violence is associated with gang affiliation. According to the UNDP 2012 *Caribbean Human Development Report*, school-aged youth who self-reported gang membership indicated that on average, they had become involved at age 12. Preliminary findings indicate that the children most at risk of becoming members of gangs are young, marginalized males. Risk factors for youth crime and violence include poverty, inadequate or poor parenting, the receding influence of institutions such as schools, faith- and community-based organizations which have traditionally served as bastions of protection; exposure to and experience of violence at home, in school, in communities and the wider society; poor or inadequate educational opportunities, and social exclusion.

CARICOM member states are treating youth violence as a matter of urgency. By September 2012, national consultations and workshops on
the implementation of prevention strategies and action to address youth gangs and violence, had been piloted in 5 Member States. These multi-stakeholder consultations, developed in tandem with the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, are one component of the four-pronged CARICOM Social Development and Crime Prevention Action Plan.

Mr Chairman,

CARICOM is fully cognizant and convinced of the need for greater sensitization and capacity building to implement programmes to address youth violence in schools and communities. We recognize that credible and effective responses to this scourge must also aim at prevention, through reducing the structural, societal, and individual risk factors. In this regard, CARICOM is aware that early childhood presents a crucial window in determining behaviour patterns in adolescence and adulthood. Investment in early childhood education and programmes has therefore gained new importance, and countries in the region continue to dedicate resources to expanding early childhood education.
The region will continue with this work, in order to save at-risk children and youth, but progress has been hampered by insufficient resources. We are keenly aware of the need for cooperation and partnerships, and continue to work with several partners in this area.

Health

Mr. Chairman,

CARICOM has accorded the highest priority to the right of its citizens to enjoy the highest attainable standard of health. Within the last several years, however, non-communicable diseases have become an epidemic in the region. The Caribbean has long recognized the importance of sports and physical activity, particularly in schools, as evidenced by strong school-based physical education programmes in most Member States. Despite this, due to shifting cultural patterns of consumption and recreation, childhood obesity is on the increase. CARICOM Member States recently acknowledged, therefore, the need for increased emphasis on physical activity, particularly in the regions' schools, as childhood offers a unique window to inculcate physical activity into part of a healthy lifestyle. The 17th special meeting of CARICOM's Council for Human and Social
Development in October 2012 focused on the theme: *Promoting inclusion, health, education and development through sport*. Ministers highlighted the need to embrace physical activity and sport to help combat NCDs. The Council also stressed the need for greater attention to be paid to sport as a means of fostering the inclusion of persons with disabilities.

Mr. Chairman,

CARICOM is firmly convinced that the promotion and protection of the rights of children must be a priority in the post-2015 development agenda. Our children *are* our future. We will continue our efforts to create a Caribbean region fit for children.

I thank you.