



BRUSSELS. Three Ministers of Foreign Affairs from three Eastern Caribbean States participated in the bi-annual intersessional ACP and Joint ACP-EU Parliamentary Assembly that was held in Brussels, capital of the European Union. Honourable Sam Condor of St. Kitts and Nevis, Honourable Alva Baptiste of Saint Lucia and Honourable Dr. Douglas Slater of St. Vincent and the Grenadines attended meetings from 19 – 22 March 2012 at the ACP House and at the European Parliament with Members of African, Caribbean and Pacific national Parliaments as well as Members of the European Parliament.

The ACP-EU Joint Parliamentary Assembly, one of the joint institutions of the ACP-EU development cooperation framework, provides a legal as well as democratic platform where ACP and EU elected representatives could discuss issues of concern to both regions and jointly seek to obtain solutions. The European Parliament has become an incontrovertible interlocutor for the ACP specifically as a result of its increased decision-making powers along with the Council of the European Union, as enshrined in the Lisbon Treaty on European Union that entered into force in 2010. The European Parliament exercises considerable power over the adoption of all legislative proposals submitted by the European Commission, including on social and financial issues affecting the Union, and also has increased jurisdiction as regards EU external affairs, and trade and development, as it must validate all international agreements signed by the EU.

ACP and EU parliamentarians debated issues such as the future of EU development assistance to ACP countries, specifically, the new interpretation given to the principle of differentiation whereby EU development cooperation will focus on the poorest of the poor based on which middle income countries such as those in the OECS could risk being graduated from EU development cooperation. ACP Parliamentarians expressed their concerns about the current difficulties experienced by African and Pacific regions in their EPA negotiations and reiterated their rejection of the recent proposal of the European Commission to withdraw 18 ACP countries that have not yet signed an EPA from the list of beneficiaries of market access preferences under Regulation 1528/2007 as of 1 January 2014. Representatives from the Eastern Caribbean States conveyed their unwavering support to African and Pacific regions as

they seek to “ensure that the agreements they conclude with the EU reflect their own integration process and is the fruit of true bi-regional cooperation”. Other issues debated by Parliamentarians included the political situations in ACP countries and joint efforts undertaken by the EU and ACP on climate change.

Many issues of concern to OECS Member States in their relations with the EU will be brought before the European Parliament, theatre of European democracy, in the near future. These include the Schengen visa waiver, the request for extension of the implementation period for Banana Accompanying Measures, budgetization of the European Development Fund (EDF), etc. “Thus, strengthening relations with the European Parliament is of paramount importance going forward,” informed Ambassador Shirley Skerritt-Andrew, Ambassador of the Eastern Caribbean States and Permanent Representative to the European Union, who accompanied the Ministers.

During their stay in Brussels, Ministers Condor, Baptiste and Slater also called on counterparts in the European External Action Service (EEAS), which is the diplomatic arm of the EU and is charged with undertaking all external action, and the European Commission Development Cooperation Directorate General. During these meetings, the Ministers raised issues of specific concern to the OECS in their relations with their major and most significant development cooperation partner, such as the need for continued EU support on socio-economic aspects of their development. The Ministers stressed the importance of the model relationship that the OECS sub-region has with the EU and cautioned that “differentiation should not lead to a missed opportunity for this flagship relationship to show its potential and squander the benefits garnered thus far” and that “EU policy hereafter should not be construed as a punishment for good performance”. Ministers expressed hope that their relationship with the EU will continue despite challenges that the Union currently faces in light of its economic crisis and policy reorientations.

Ministers also underscored the “importance of EU assistance that has thus far taken account of the inherent structural vulnerabilities of the micro-states of the OECS that need to be constantly overcome”, such as falling levels of FDI and ODA, changing trade rules and a “tempering of growth in the tourism sector that is exacerbated by the imposition of contrary taxes on travel by some EU countries to Caribbean destinations”. They supported the EU’s attachment to regional integration through its assistance to the CARIFORUM-EU EPA and its joint work on the Joint Caribbean-EU Partnership Strategy. Ministers raised other pertinent issues to the OECS such as the need for consideration to be given on the flexibility for the implementation of Banana Accompanying Measures, while EU representatives underscored the importance of ensuring mutual political support in multilateral fora such as at the UN.

The Minister of Foreign Affairs of Saint Lucia is the current Chairperson of the ACP Council of Ministers and in that capacity, along with the Ministers from St. Kitts and Nevis and St. Vincent and the Grenadines, also met with the Secretary General of the ACP Secretariat, Dr. Mohamed Ibn Chambas. They emphasized the importance of strengthening relations between Africa and the Caribbean not least from the viewpoint of their shared cultures. They expressed hope that their meeting would be seen as a signal for closer relations that would foster change in both regions as the OECS and ACP seek to redefine their relevance on the global stage.
