

NEWS: CARIFORUM must enhance competitiveness for EPAs, says CARICOM chief

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Georgetown, Guyana, 29 November 2011/ CNN/ ACP Newsdesk -- Irwin LaRocque, Caribbean Community (CARICOM) Secretary-General, has sounded a challenge for Caribbean Forum of African Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) States (CARIFORUM) to enhance their competitiveness and productivity in order to take advantage of the opportunities provided by the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) between CARIFORUM and the European Union (EU).

Making his inaugural address as both CARICOM and CARIFORUM Secretary-General at the nineteenth meeting of the Council of Ministers of CARIFORUM in Roseau, Dominica last Friday, LaRocque said that the challenges which exist in Europe should be borne in mind as the ministers reviewed the 10th European Development Fund Regional Indicative Programme.

He noted the critical role in being played by Caribbean Export, boosting capacity within the region to participate in the EPA, through the implementation the 28 million Euro programme aimed at improving private sector competitiveness and innovation that include direct assistance at the enterprise level. The involvement of the private sector in these efforts was essential, LaRocque said.

The CARICOM Secretary-General said that resources available to the region through the EU must be efficiently programmed and utilised against the challenges this major international development partner now faced.

Noting that CARIFORUM, among all ACP regions, had the highest rate of commitment of the 10th EDF Regional Indicative Programmes at 80%, he said that the meeting presented the opportunity to "ensure timely conclusion of the programming process and to make appropriate arrangements for effective and timely implementation, the results of which must have a positive impact on the quality of life of the peoples of CARIFORUM."

The assumption of responsibilities of the Council of Ministers of CARIFORUM came at a critical time in CARIFORUM's history, the secretary-general said.

"While our countries are yet to climb out of the financial and economic crisis of 2008, we are beginning to feel the effects of a new global period of stagnation with low or no economic growth, high unemployment and burdensome sovereign debt in most of our major trading partners as well as in our member states."

This compounded with recent developments in Greece, Spain and Italy, these developments necessitated that the region "draw down on these resources in the shortest possible time," the secretary-general said.

LaRocque stated that the Council of Ministers of CARIFORUM must determine its strategies and approaches for dealing with recent EU proposals for changes in its aid and development policy, and a proposal for the introduction of the concepts of differentiation and graduation from access to grant resources. This discussion, he said, must take place bearing in mind the political and policy dialogue which the region must have with the EU in the coming months.

"Our discussion must also take place within the context of the Joint CARIFORUM-EU Strategy, which we are in the process of finalising and which will determine the relationship between CARIFORUM and the EU in the short and medium term,"

LaRocque said.

Head of the EPA Implementation Unit, Branford Isaacs was slated to inform the ministers of the action and initiatives taken at the level of the institutions established under the EPA; the state of play with regard to the time-bound provisions of the agreement that have come due; and the technical assistance the EPA Unit has given to states so far.

- *Caribbean News Now*

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