

**Opening Remarks of
Secretary Jaime J. Bautista
Department of Transportation**

Good morning.

It is an honor to participate in this 15th Meeting of the Collaborative Arrangement for the Prevention and Management of Public Health Events in Civil Aviation, specifically in the Asia-Pacific region.

For CAPSCA to hold its first post-pandemic physical meeting here in the Philippines presents an opportunity for us to evaluate the effectiveness of our collective efforts at responding to a global health crisis, an event we all prepared for since 2006.

The COVID-19 pandemic tested our ability to promptly execute those plans intended to mitigate the spread of the virus through air travel.

Today, we get to ask if we succeeded.

The Philippine response may have been consistent with those plans but we dare admit inadequacy in timing.

The Philippine government formed the Inter-Agency Task Force for the Management of Emerging Infectious Diseases or IATF to locally manage the pandemic.

The IATF had the unenviable role of balancing between protecting the citizens from the virus and preventing the collapse of the national economy.

Much deliberation eventually led to the decision to close our borders which came rather belated.

In fact, even before that decision was made, the Civil Aviation Authority of the Philippines prevented two chartered flights from leaving Wuhan, China, in January 2020 bound for one of our tourist islands. An earlier chartered flight that was able to land on the island was ordered to return to Wuhan immediately.

Subsequent quarantine protocols, including total lockdown of airports, seaports, railways and land transport, restricted movement of people.

Travel restrictions enabled us to control the number of infections from getting out of control, even with the second, third and fourth waves.

Availability of testing kits and a massive nationwide vaccination campaign had high degree of success.

The concerted efforts of government agencies, including the Department of Transportation, prevented the number of deaths due to COVID from spiraling.

Two years hence, we gather to review our actions, share insights and formulate new strategies at responding to future global health crises.

Just as air travel hastened the virus spread, we are now pinning our hopes to accelerate the global economic rebound through calculated measures to revive the air transport industry.

In the Philippines, we have not totally abandoned health protocols at airports even with the surge of revenge travel.

While government had eased health protocols including voluntary use of face masks at public places, we at the Department of Transportation maintained its use whenever using public transport.

We share everyone's apprehension if we are doing enough to prevent any resurgence. Government is even more apprehensive during this holiday season when crowds of shoppers and party goers travel unrestricted.

The pre-pandemic levels of air passengers and other travelers have been breached.

Although business is doing great, we are still wary.

So, how do we approach the coming year with a fresh perspective at preparing for the next health crisis?

We have many lessons to learn, insights to share and plans to calibrate.

Only when we collaborate can our actions be effective.

With valuable assistance from the International Civil Aviation Organization and the World Health Organization, we should use this occasion to provide critical

updates to the recommendations formulated by the ICAO Council's Aviation Recovery Task Force or CART.

I can assure you the Philippine transport department eagerly looks forward to innovative ways of boosting international air travel while cautiously keeping health protocols in place.

I have always advocated for cross-agency communications, not just among nations and international aviation bodies but more crucial with local health and industry stakeholders.

We therefore urge today's participants to be candid, to be persistent, to be bold.

In the Philippine setting, we dread a repeat of another total lockdown that will gravely debilitate our economy.

But then, it would be wise to be inflexible at compromising human lives against economic benefits.

Discerning our next steps should now be based on actual experiences, rich in practical wisdom, tempered by economic considerations.

We have much to learn and so much more to lose.

Focus should be on vulnerable sectors and how we can better rescue them from the next health crisis.

While we pleasantly struggle to keep pace with the rapid rise of air travel, let us not forget 9-11, the way it changed the way we travel.

The lessons were hard and tragic but we managed to rebound.

The best time to make a rebound is right after the crisis.

Let's start now.

Thank you and good morning.