

Caribbean leaders open meeting in D.C.

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WASHINGTON --

With their stunning beaches and relatively small populations, Caribbean nations have significant potential for growth. But as drug traffickers increasingly target their open borders, and trade preferences make them less competitive, they also face stark challenges.

That was the message heard Tuesday as leaders from the 15-member Caribbean Community (CARICOM) officially began the three-day Conference on the Caribbean, aimed at strengthening the region's U.S. ties and getting Caribbean-Americans more involved in the region's future.

"We do not bring a laundry list of demands. And we come not in supplication but in genuine friendship," said Ralph Gonsalves, prime minister of St. Vincent and the Grenadines and outgoing chairman of CARICOM. Gonsalves said the community is seeking a "mature partnership" with the United States, its largest trading partner.

But CARICOM leaders added that they hope to raise a number of issues when they meet Wednesday with President Bush. They include concerns over security and trade, the U.S. deportation of criminals and the drain of Caribbean healthcare professionals moving to the United States.

"The greatest challenge confronting the Caribbean is to find a way to address what is essentially the post colonial economy," Prime Minister Owen Arthur of Barbados said in his keynote address. Arthur is the incoming chairman of CARICOM.

Tourism has replaced sugar and bananas, but the island-nations are still struggling to export their products, as eroding trade preferences increasingly put them at a disadvantage.

U.S. Secretary of Commerce Carlos Gutierrez also addressed the group, as did the leaders of the Organization of the American States, the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank.

"While the region enjoys benefits from its natural beauty, its location and its proximity to a large market, it can also be a victim of its geography," said Graeme Wheeler, managing director of the World Bank. "The location of the region as a transshipment corridor for drugs and for weapons is hurting growth, and so development. These issues require an international response."

Wheeler complimented the region for coordinating regional policies through the Caribbean Single Market and Economy, which allows the free movement of certain skilled workers. But he warned that the CSME could not achieve success for their small economies alone.

Following the opening session, Caribbean leaders were to go to Capitol Hill to meet with several influential congressmen, including Ways and Means Chairman Charles Rangel, D-N.Y., to talk about trade. They were to meet with the Caribbean Americans later in the day.

Gutierrez told the group that the United States values its relationship with the Caribbean and is committed to helping its nations flourish.

"We believe in the great potential of the Western hemisphere," Gutierrez said. "The United States is committed to ongoing dialogue. We are especially optimistic about the future of the Caribbean."