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**Statement by the Chair of
the International Coffee Council,
H.E. Mr Iván Romero-Martínez, made at the
opening ceremony of the 131st Session
of the Council**

Honourable delegates,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Welcome to the 131st Session of the International Coffee Council. As you are no doubt aware, this is a special session of the Council, convened for the purpose of selecting the eighth Executive Director since 1963. This is a solemn occasion in which Members must choose carefully the person who will lead the Organization during the next five years.

We have two well-qualified candidates before us: Ms Vanusia Nogueira, of Brazil, and Mr Tran Kim Long, of Viet Nam. If Ms Nogueira is selected, she will be the first female Executive Director; while Mr Tran, if he is appointed, will be the first Executive Director from Asia. So, we will be making history whoever happens to be selected. The historic nature of our task reinforces the importance of our responsibility. I am sure you will choose wisely.

As Chair of the International Coffee Council for coffee year 2021/22, I am very conscious of the need to preserve unity and to maintain our long tradition of reaching decisions by consensus, especially in the case of important decisions such as the appointment of a new Executive Director. For this reason, I have set aside time, today and tomorrow, to conduct informal consultations with all delegations that are represented in this Council session. I want to assure you that these consultations will be conducted in a climate of strict neutrality. I will need the support of the Secretariat to help organize this process, to assist with languages and to measure the support for each candidate. Since the Executive Director is a compatriot of one of the candidates, he will not take part in these talks. Instead, I will be assisted by the Head of Operations. After the conclusion of these consultations, I will approach the two delegations that have sponsored candidates and provide a clear description of the level of support for each nominee. At this time, I hope that the candidacy with less backing will be withdrawn and that the new Executive Director can be chosen unanimously by acclamation.

I am sure that we will be in good hands whichever candidate is chosen and that he or she will be able to count on the support of all ICO Members.

This support is necessary because the role of the Executive Director is not an easy one. The term of the current Executive Director, Mr José Sette, has been marked by a prolonged period of low prices, which have jeopardized the livelihoods of coffee farmers all over the world. This had serious repercussions on the resources available. The number of permanent staff has been reduced to just 10 from 24 in 2016/17 and this year's emergency budget for the Organization is 35% smaller than that of 2016/17. Nevertheless, the response of the Organization has been remarkable, especially the measures introduced to implement Resolution 465 and associated Council decisions. These led to the creation a unique body, the Coffee Public-Private Task Force, which promotes a dialogue with the private sector and drives concrete change in the sustainability of the world coffee sector, especially those who are most vulnerable: the millions of coffee farmers who work so hard to provide us with this delicious drink but whose reward is often insufficient. The Task Force has evolved considerably during its short existence. The foundations for change have been laid. However, we are now moving to a phase of "action on the ground" and achieving tangible results. Let me thank again all donors, especially Germany and Switzerland but also the private sector, who have contributed substantial voluntary resources to the ICO.

Fortunately, prices have risen in recent months as a result of climate events in Brazil, the world's largest coffee producer, and logistics constraints due to the covid-19 pandemic. History tells us that the current period of relatively high prices will not last forever, so let us take advantage of these favourable times while we can to implement needed reforms in our coffee sectors.

Meanwhile, considerable progress has been made in the negotiation of a new International Coffee Agreement. The Working Group that is responsible for the negotiation is approaching the end of its work and will meet on a weekly basis from now on. Among other important innovations, the new Agreement will be marked by important improvements in the integration of the private sector in the work of the Organization. As you are aware, the Working Group is open to all Members. I encourage all of you to participate actively in its work, in order to produce a new Agreement that will strengthen the engagement of existing Members and attract new Members to the ICO family.

Honourable delegates,
Ladies and gentlemen,

The last physical meeting of the Council took place in September 2019, almost two and a half years ago. I am acutely aware of the impact of working virtually on our work. Organizations like the ICO require the active interaction of delegates in order to promote a fruitful exchange of ideas. Working online restricts this much-needed dialogue and hinders convergence towards mutual understanding. Bearing in mind the limitations

imposed by the on-line nature of these proceedings and the need to respect the working hours of our dear interpreters, without whom we would be unable to understand each other, I request you to keep your interventions as brief as possible, so that our work can proceed efficiently. I miss seeing you all in person and hope that we will return soon to in-person meetings.

In this spirit of brevity, I will not extend myself and will conclude by repeating some words that I have previously stated in this forum: "The ICO is what Members wish it to be." Your choice of a new Executive Director in this Special Session of the International Coffee Council will be crucial to the next five years of the existence of the Organization. I am sure that you will choose wisely. Meanwhile, I am here to facilitate the process of selection in a neutral fashion and I count on your assistance in making this procedure as smooth and effective as possible.