



The Honourable Gaston A. Browne
Prime Minister of Antigua and Barbuda

ADDRESS

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GENERAL ASSEMBLY

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Check against delivery

Your Excellency Abdulla Shaid
Secretary-General,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates

Mr President

I congratulate you on your election to the presidency of this Seventy-Sixth Session of the General Assembly.

Antigua and Barbuda assures you of our fullest cooperation as you steer our collective work in what will be a challenging year.

Mr. President

I agree wholeheartedly with Secretary-General Antonio Guterres that the international community is failing to deliver policies to support peace, global health, the viability of our planet and other pressing needs.

I also agree with him that the lack of a global response and vaccination programme to end the COVID-19 pandemic is a clear and tragic example of such failure.

If developed countries had acted in a manner that allowed for the proper access to vaccines and medical supplies at the onset of the pandemic, globally we would be in a better place.

Developing countries were not seeking handouts.

Many of our countries paid into a global system that promised early access to vaccines.

But it could not deliver because, the majority of the vaccines from the major pharmaceutical companies had been bought or contracted and hoarded by a few wealthy nations, leaving the rest of the world bereft of the means to save their people.

This selfish nationalism forced most nations to rely on vaccine charity which, in itself, has not solved the problem of large numbers of people remaining unvaccinated throughout the world.

No country wanted charity; no country wanted to beg for vaccines that should be a global good accessible to all.

We were ready to pay.

But the vaccines were hoarded, and the pharmaceutical companies demanded prices beyond the capacity of countries whose economies were already decimated by the economic effects of the pandemic.

Mr President, the world should not witness such a spectacle again.

What is significant about the COVID-19 pandemic is that years of warnings of an inevitable pandemic threat were not addressed and there was inadequate funding and stress testing of preparedness.

The nations that must bear the burden of responsibility for this lack of preparedness must be those who control the world's health systems and who did nothing to put in place the resources necessary to, at least, alleviate the effects of the pandemic when it came.

What was also troubling was the absence of coordinated, global leadership.

Instead of cooperation, the world witnessed finger-pointing and conspiracy theories about where the novel coronavirus originated and who was responsible.

The resulting global tension undermined multilateral institutions and cooperative action.

The World Health Organization became the scapegoat even though it was not the management of the Organization that caused it to be underfunded and under resourced.

Blame was cast at the WHO as if it is not the representatives of powerful governments who set its priorities and determine how and where its money should be spent and on what.

Developing countries, and especially small states, Mr President, have to be absolved from responsibility for the lack of response, because they neither control the decision-making bodies, nor do they have the power to allocate funding.

Often the cries of small countries are either ignored or discarded, even on the few occasions when we actually get a seat at the table.

There was no dedicated fund of the size necessary to supply medical equipment and to ensure vaccines would be available to all.

International financing, when it came, was too little and too late.

Nothing has changed since then.

International financing to stop COVID, and to deal with its impact both on health and economies, is still too little.

COVID-19 is still infecting people all over the world, every minute of every day.

People are still dying every minute of every day.

Economies are still being ruined every minute of every day.

And the prospect of recovery recedes every minute of every day.

Mr. President,

US President Biden is to be congratulated for convening this week a Global Summit on COVID 19.

He has shown great leadership, and we are grateful that the United States has committed an additional 250M in the first instance to establish a pandemic fund at the World Bank to proactively address future biological threats and pandemics.

But more is needed, and a more organized global machinery is needed, under the auspices of this UN Organization.

In my own participation in President Biden's Summit on COVID, I made it clear that the pandemic has wrecked economies in small island states including CARICOM countries.

In some states, more than 20 per cent of Gross Domestic Product has been lost; unemployment has risen; poverty has expanded and demands on the State has multiplied even as revenues have declined steeply.

I told the Biden summit that, for our small countries, recovering from the economic effects of COVID-19 will be protracted because hard won economic progress has been greatly reversed.

Therefore, building back will be longer and harder for small island states than it will be in larger economies with greater resources.

Thousands of our people have been infected and thousands have died – many who had not yet begun to enjoy life, and others who had much to contribute.

I emphatically stated that the disease must be stopped.

Mr President, we must stop behaving as if the Pandemic has ended; it has not.

I quote Secretary-General Guterres again, because he is perfectly right when he says:

“The longer the virus circulates among billions of unvaccinated people, the higher the risk that it will develop into more dangerous variants that could rip through vaccinated and unvaccinated populations alike, with a far higher fatality rate”.

A high rate of inoculations by rich countries with both the vaccines and the money must not be regarded as a great success, not even for those countries, because, today, there is no greater truth than the mantra that no country is safe until all countries are safe.

Antigua and Barbuda is committed to a global drive to inoculate 70 per cent of the world's population by September 2022,

My government has taken the action to make inoculations against COVID-19 mandatory for all public sector workers to protect the lives of all, including tourists who visit our shores.

We are determined to overcome the baselessly flawed arguments of those who promote resistance to vaccines despite the fact that, sadly, the number of COVID victims rise daily.

We will educate and inform our people at home.

But, Mr. President, we will continue to raise our voice internationally for the equitable distribution of vaccines at affordable prices and for the reduction in the pricing for COVID testing.

Vaccines are a global good; they should not be a commodity for profit at the expense of human life.

We are also committed to work for better global planning and preparation for any future pandemic.

But while we will play our part utilizing our scarce resources we will continue to argue for the provision of resources to poor and vulnerable countries.

We didn't start the pandemic.

And no virus has ever originated in Caribbean countries or being spread from it.

We have been – and are – victims of others who must recognize their responsibilities and act on them.

In this connection, my government is extremely disturbed about incidents in which some countries have not recognised vaccines administered in Caribbean countries, and have forced fully vaccinated travellers in to quarantine.

Governments cannot urge people to get inoculated on the basis that the best vaccine is the available vaccine, and yet discriminate against vaccines that were not manufactured directly in North America and Europe.

This would not only be a form of vaccine apartheid, it would defeat the objective of inoculating 70 per cent of the world's people by this time next year.

This discrimination must cease now before it becomes a norm by some developed countries.

It is wrong; unjust, and patently unfair.

Mr President, my government will cooperate with all governments to protect our world, giving our young people the chance to live a safe, secure, and enjoyable life, but stopping the COVID-19 pandemic still is a global responsibility and the burden of sharing its cost must be borne equitably.

Antigua and Barbuda warns now that the international system has to prepare for future pandemics which are surely coming, particularly as action on Climate Change has also been a failure.

The impact of Climate Change will undoubtedly bring new vector borne diseases and viruses that jump from animal to man.

The World Health Organization, the IMF, the World Bank and this very United Nations Organization must start gearing up now to prepare for the pandemics of the future.

The UN Security Council should be treating pandemics as major security risks to the world, and it should act accordingly to use the full powers of the Council to meet these global threats.

Never again, Mr President, should the world be caught unprepared to manage and end a pandemic swiftly.

Never again should millions of people be killed by a disease that could have been stopped earlier.

And never again should there be such a selfish display of nationalism as we witnessed in the response to a Global threat.

The same argument applies to Climate Change.

Mr. President, Antigua and Barbuda hopes that COP26 in Glasgow, at the end of October, will be an inflection point at which all nations will commit themselves to saving the planet.

There is no planet B.

The consequences of Climate Change will be catastrophic.

For some small island states, it already is.

Recent research, published by the Royal Institute of International Affairs, reveals a dire situation for the world unless action is taken now by the world's greatest polluters to significantly reduce their CO2 emissions.

I highlight some of the findings in the report.

By 2040, almost 700 million people each year will likely be exposed to prolonged severe droughts of at least six months' duration. Many millions will die.

Experts are concerned that climate change is likely to increase the prevalence of emerging infectious diseases and vector-borne diseases.

They argue that Climate Change disrupts ecosystems and increases the risk of diseases jumping to new hosts.

Scientists have been warning for many years of the probability of pandemics increasing as a result of climate change.

In 2008, a study published in the journal Nature, found that over the previous decade nearly one-third of emerging infectious diseases were vector-borne, with the jumps to humans corresponding to changes in the climate.

For instance, insects such as infection-bearing mosquitoes follow changing geographic temperature patterns.

According to the research, interconnections between shifting weather patterns, resulting in changes to ecosystems, and the rise of pests and diseases, combined with

heatwaves and droughts, will likely drive unprecedented crop failure, food insecurity and migration of people.

All this, the report argues, could result in the potential breakdown of governance and political systems as societies become increasingly unstable due to lack of income, as well as competition, over limited food supplies.

The report says that Experts are concerned that such situations could lead to a rise of extremist groups, paramilitary intervention, organized violence, and conflict between people and states.

That should be a scenario that worries us all, for, as we have seen in recent times, no nation is immune from violent strife.

Mr President, it is evident that global solidarity and firm commitments are required; commitments that will result in emission cuts to reduce global temperatures below 1.5 degrees Celsius of preindustrial levels.

Equally vital is access to quality financing and climate technologies in order to save our planet.

And, contracting debt to pay for recovery from the effects of Climate Change and to build resilience is not the answer to the problems of small states that are already burdened by debt and are the worst affected.

Funding packages for Small Island Developing States should include a significant amount of official development assistance – in other words, grants not loans.

Most states have significant debt overhang.

They are simply not in a position to assume more debt, especially after the economic devastation of the COVID-19 pandemic.

And, Mr President, the ODA component in funding for SIDS should not be seen as a gift or charity.

Let me here thank the Government of Denmark that has announced its proposal to significantly increase its contribution to climate aid.

The Danish government wrote to me, a few days ago, to say that it has earmarked 60 percent of its annual grant for adaptation and resilience initiatives, especially in the most vulnerable countries.

Note that Denmark is giving a grant, not a loan.

Mr President, the news that Denmark will contribute more than 1 percent of the global collective target for climate financing is welcome with deep appreciation.

It is my hope that Denmark's action will help to galvanize others to contribute their fair share to the collective efforts required to address climate change at COP26.

Mr President, industrialized countries have an obligation to assist the states most affected by Climate Change because they created a problem in the first instance.

Climate ODA should be seen as a form of climate reparations to compensate for past climate damage.

In addition to official development assistance, debt swaps, and debt cancellation; climate related debts would help small states to build financial capacity to accelerate the transition into renewable technologies.

No new or significant sums of monies would be needed to achieve these debt cancellations; they would be mere book entries that will bring significant relief and sustainability to SIDS, while at the same time not creating any significant financial pressures for the industrialized countries.

This is a non-confrontational form of climate justice.

The alternative is, that affected states may be forced to take legal action in the international courts to seek compensation for provable damage.

Such a course is not one that small states would take with alacrity, but some of us may have to do so from necessity.

If nothing is done by the major polluting country both to cease their destructive actions and to help to repair the damage that they are causing, we may be left no choice.

That is not our preference.

We want global solidarity in the face of global adversity.

Mr President, there is an obvious need for a realignment of the international financial architecture to accelerate the global transition into renewables, in order to achieve a carbon neutral world within the next two decades.

Let me point out one serious anomaly.

While developed countries in North America and Europe are urging small and vulnerable states to transition to alternative energy, they are providing US\$1.6 trillion annually to subsidize fossil fuel businesses.

By contrast, the sum being made available to developing countries is a mere US\$2 billion a year.

If developed countries simply shifted their spending from providing subsidies to fossil fuel businesses to helping developing countries to cope with the impact of Climate Change, not only would they not have to spend one additional cent, they would also create greater opportunities for renewable energy in their own countries.

The world would also be less polluted, and Climate Change would retreat.

Mr President, I want to remind everyone that investments in nuclear armaments and other weapons cannot sustain the planet, but investment to combat climate change will certainly save our Earth, our single homeland and our human civilisation.

That is why we should all work diligently at COP26 in Glasgow to strengthen everyone's commitment to 1.5 degrees Celsius for us all to stay alive.

Mr President, I have concentrated my statement at this year's assembly on the COVID-19 pandemic and Climate Change because they are the two overarching issues that confront mankind.

Dealing with them successfully is what will give future generations a chance to live in peace, prosperity and safety.

Those generations are our children and grandchildren.

So what future do we want for them?

Should we not act to give them the glorious future we want for them, and that they deserve?

We certainly should.

I Thank you