

76th Session of the UN General Assembly
Statement by
Hon. Bob Loughman Weibur, Prime Minister of the Republic of
Vanuatu
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Mr. President;
Excellencies, Heads of State and Governments;
Mr. Secretary-General;
Distinguished Delegates;
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Introduction

I have the great honour to deliver this address on behalf of the government and people of the Republic of Vanuatu.

Mr President,

At the outset, let me sincerely congratulate you on assuming the presidency of this 76th session of the United Nations General Assembly. Your Excellency, I assure you of Vanuatu's committed support during your tenure. We have every confidence that your presidency will successfully guide us in our collective pursuit of the future we want, and rally the spirit of cooperation essential for the United Nations we need.

I would also like to extend our heartfelt gratitude to His Excellency Volkan Bozkir, the outgoing President of the 75th Session on his outstanding stewardship of this august body during such a challenging time.

Mr. President,

Let me join my fellow world leaders by expressing Vanuatu's sympathy and solidarity to all Governments and peoples around the world who have been gravely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The UN High -Level Week is convened at a time where we need to scale up our collaborative efforts to find solutions to a myriad of global issues, not least to join efforts in containing the COVID-19 pandemic. Disease and despair have characterized the past two years. Inequality, injustice and instability have increased. Our planet is suffering and we need to get moving again, rebuild communities and join efforts to rescue the planet, recover economies and restore hope. We need to adapt to the new normal to work together towards a better future for ourselves, our children and the future generations to come.

The theme for this 76th Session “we need to rebuild sustainably. Our decade of action will now also have to be a decade of recovery, focused on building back better, stronger, greener and bluer” is very fitting to address the current global challenges that we face and is consistent with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Global Challenges

Mr. President,

The last two years have been undoubtedly dominated by the COVID-19 pandemic which has thus far resulted in the death of more than 4 million people worldwide. The pandemic represents one of the most profound challenges to socio-economic development in all countries.

There is no doubt that it has a broad humanitarian, social and economic impact in the short to long term and has set back achievements of the 2030 agenda and sustainable development goals.

There are increasingly evident effects of climate change, including record-breaking wildfires, flooding and more extreme temperatures. The latest IPCC report provides new estimates of the chances of crossing the global warming level of 1.5 degrees in the next decades. Unless there are immediate, rapid and large-scale reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, limiting warming to near 1.5 degrees will be beyond reach.

These issues are increasingly eluding the control of individual national governments. Global solidarity and concerted international cooperation is therefore very essential. For us and other small island developing states especially, our biggest threats are global – most notably climate change, the management of our oceans and of course the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, our solutions too must be global. To recover better together, we need to take comprehensive action at the global, regional and national levels. Effective and sustainable support is now needed more than ever to regain momentum of international cooperation to advancing the 2030 Agenda, while building inclusive economies and resilient societies.

The Pacific leaders during the recent 51st Pacific Islands Forum meeting also acknowledged the challenges that threatens the strength and solidarity of the Forum family and called on leaders to be redirected to the Pacific Way of dialogue to address these challenges. This includes the COVID-19 pandemic, economic challenges, the

intensifying climate crisis facing Pacific Island Countries and intensification of geopolitical competition in the Pacific region.

Vanuatu situation

Mr President,

In all countries, the economic shock caused by the pandemic has exposed structural weaknesses, notably in health and social protection systems. For Vanuatu, a recently graduated least developed country (LDC), the challenge was compounded by a natural disaster. The COVID-19 pandemic followed by the Category 5 Tropical Cyclone Harold which caused extensive devastation in April 2020 has meant detrimental impacts on the economy, society and communities at an unprecedented level. The path to recovery will be a challenging one to navigate if the pandemic is not contained soon.

Like many other small Pacific island countries, Vanuatu has managed to escape the COVID-19 transmission. Swift lockdown on international borders provided a window to prepare on the health side, but these containment measures have crippled the economy. If the Coronavirus did enter Vanuatu, the health focus would immediately need to swing from prevention and preparedness to treatment and containment. An internal lockdown would heavily impact private and domestic sector participation in recovery process, add further stress to the economy and deepen the impact on community coping mechanisms.

For Vanuatu, rapid closure of international borders in March 2020, meant transitioning from a health threat to an economic emergency. Many businesses, especially those reliant on tourism effectively ground to a halt. No tourist arrivals and a reduced resident community immediately impacted the hospitality and construction sectors, putting at least 8,000 formal jobs in jeopardy and affecting the livelihoods of tens of thousands of people

in the informal sector. For more than 1,000 licensed handicraft artisans, their incomes plummeted to near-zero.

Mr. President,

As a small island nation, we know too well the importance of global solidarity. We know from experience that we are always better off when we are working together rather than in isolation.

It was in this spirit that we came together as a nation in July to celebrate our 41st anniversary of political independence. We celebrated our achievements with strong determination, resilience and hope for a better future despite the catastrophe that has been unleashed by the pandemic and natural disasters. We recommitted ourselves as a nation to work towards economic self-reliance with a major focus on the productive sector.

In responding to the COVID-19 and TC Harold, the Vanuatu Government has put together policies and strategies, aligned to the National Sustainable Development Plan, to address the impacts of the compounded disaster.

We reacted swiftly, imposing international lockdown followed by an extended period of national state of emergency from March 2020 to date as an immediate measure to contain the spread of the virus.

We developed a national recovery strategy that is aimed at supporting communities impacted by TC Harold and COVID-19, providing that framework to recover, rebuild and emerge stronger and more resilient. The strategy responds to social, economic and environmental impacts of the compounded disaster. It re-establishes and strengthens the public service to effectively lead and implement recovery in health and education,

support and protect people with disabilities and other vulnerable groups, in repairing and upgrading infrastructure and strengthening environmental service and resilience.

We commend the tremendous support of our development partners to the implementation of this strategy, especially in this difficult time where impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have imposed great threat to the implementation progress of the country's National Sustainable Development Plan.

The Vanuatu Government also introduced the COVID-19 stimulus package with a focus on preserving jobs, providing Government subsidies and commodity support grant, tuition fee exemption, grants for employment stabilization, stabilizing business and trade activities, tax relief, facilitating rural growth and enabling remittances through labour mobility programs. Recognizing our development partners' support, the Government has spent over 4 billion vatu for this program and may require further prudent fiscal measures to sustain the economy if the COVID-19 situation persists.

We have re-negotiated and re-established the seasonal workers program with Australia and New Zealand, a bilateral arrangement where Vanuatu exports labour to work in farms, hospitality and meat processing factories in New Zealand and Australia. The program has proven to be a success with more than 5000 Ni-Vanuatu workers recruited in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

We started the COVID-19 vaccination roll out program towards the end of May this year and at this point we have only vaccinated about 10% of the eligible population. The Government is ramping up efforts across the country, providing awareness to educate the citizens on benefits of the vaccines and mobilize the masses to get vaccinated. We thank our major development partners who assisted us to making vaccines available through the COVAX facility. Vaccine access remains the most critical issue for the global recovery. Global cooperation on vaccines is required to help

prevent renewed waves of infection and the emergence of new variants, to end the health crisis sooner, and allow for faster normalization of activities in all countries.

Mr. President,

Vanuatu has also taken a bold step to graduate out of the LDC category on December 4, 2020 despite TC Harold and in the midst of COVID-19. We have done so because we believe it is the right thing to do which propels Vanuatu in a positive ‘can do’ attitude that we will rise up and do all we can with courage, boldness and determination to address and cope with the natural characteristics of our existence and most importantly the unique nature of the COVID-19 pandemic that is still unraveling. We wish to acknowledge the invaluable backing from UNESCAP, UNDESA, UNCTAD, EU, the Government of Australia, New Zealand, Japan and China and other development partners who are supporting the implementation of Vanuatu’s Smooth Transition Strategy. With their support, Vanuatu will transition smoothly beyond graduation – with new vigor, new thinking and new pathways of development and partnerships towards equality, resilience and environmental sustainability.

I wish to also acknowledge support from the international community to successfully get a United Nations General Assembly resolution which extended the International Support Measures cutoff date for Vanuatu to December 2025. This extension gives us ample time to fully recover from the impacts of TC Harold and ensuring also the full implementation of our smooth transition strategy, particularly in the targeted areas of trade, aid for trade and participation in international forums.

We need the international community to strengthen and expand the international support measures both for graduating and graduated countries. This is especially important given the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and to build resilience in these countries to ensure smooth transitions. The Graduation Support Facility by UNDESA offering dedicated

capacity development support services as new measures of support to graduated and graduating LDCs is an excellent example.

The facility being piloted by UNDESA in Vanuatu is supporting us to implement our Smooth Transition Strategy. Vanuatu will share its experiences to inform the services of the facility to other graduating LDCs.

I want to also highlight the need for UN agencies to improve monitoring mechanisms for graduating and graduated countries, and provide better incentives for countries to participate in that mechanism as many face capacity challenges. Here, regional UN organizations like ESCAP could continue its support to graduating LDCs in preparing for Smooth Transition Strategies and scale up its technical assistance to graduated countries in implementing and monitoring the strategies.

Human Rights and Decolonization

Mr. President,

As we look ahead to the future we want, we must picture a world of freedom; one that is free from predominance of colonial rule, persecution and human rights abuses.

In my region, New Caledonia, French Polynesia and West Papua are still struggling for self-determination. Drawing attention to the principle of “equal rights and self-determination of peoples” as stipulated in the UN Charter, it is important that the UN and the international community continue to support the relevant territories, giving them an equal opportunity to determine their own statehood.

With recent referendum results in New Caledonia, in comparison to the 2018 results, there is now a narrower margin of votes between those voting for and against independence. It

is therefore important that the referendums remain free, fair and transparent and continue under the supervision of the United Nations.

It is in this connection that we continue to remind ourselves the people of Vanuatu of our strong cultural connection with the Umaenupne and Umaeneag islands, commonly referred to in English as Matthew and Hunter Islands. Recognizing the incomplete process for the decolonization of Vanuatu, we hope that the UN-led process draws a clear pathway to achieve peaceful settlement of these disputed islands.

Mr. President,

There are widespread human rights violations around the world. In my region, the indigenous people of West Papua continue to suffer from human rights violations. The Pacific Forum and ACP Leaders among other leaders have called on the Indonesian Government to allow the United Nations Office of the Human Rights Commissioner to visit West Papua Province and to provide an independent assessment of the human rights situation. To date there has been little progress on this front. I hope the international community through appropriate UN-led process takes a serious look at this issue and address it fairly.

Conclusion

Mr. President,

Amongst many other issues facing our world today, COVID-19 pandemic is undoubtedly an imminent and common threat to humanity. To ensure global recovery and building back better together, global cooperation on vaccines is very essential to allow for faster normalization of activity in all countries. The world is only resilient as the least resilient country.

The theme of the 76th session of the UN General Assembly is very fitting and points us to the very essence of the United Nations. As imbedded in the United Nations Charter, the system was designed to be flexible to allow a myriad of challenges and unforeseen issues to be urgently addressed.

To recover from the pandemic, we need international cooperation to build back better for a sustainable, inclusive and just recovery. We must leave our differences and disagreements aside and renew our collective commitment to multilateralism. We must combine our efforts to address our global challenges and make sure that no one is left behind.

I thank you!