



ICELAND

Statement by

H.E. Dr. Össur Skarphéðinsson

**Minister for Foreign Affairs
and External Trade
of Iceland**

64th Session of the General Assembly

New York, 26 September 2009

Check against delivery

Mr. President,

Only a year ago, this very weekend, my country, Iceland found itself in the beginning of the global financial storm. It swept almost the entire banking system off the ground, and left Iceland facing her most severe economic set-back in living memory.

We were the first country to fall victim to the greed and excess of Icelandic as well as international financiers who abused rules, followed dubious work-ethics, hid their money in tax-havens and induced an irresponsible system of stellar bonuses that incited reckless behaviour far beyond anything the world has seen.

In Iceland, those responsible left in their wake a scorched earth, bewildered citizens, full of sorrow and anger, scarred by the possibility of imminent bankruptcies, loss of their houses and jobs.

Iceland, however, is pulling through, not least because we have someone to lean on. Our Nordic family didn't desert us. The Baltic countries gave us moral support. Poland, out of the generosity of her heart, lent us a hand without even being asked – which we shall never forget. The IMF offered us a stabilization program, which remains broadly on track, although I have to voice Iceland's great dissatisfaction with the fact, that unrelated bilateral disputes have prevented the program to be fully implemented. Our application to join the European Union has also been warmly received by our European neighbours.

I am therefore confident when I say, that the financial storms are beginning to break. That is due both to the resilience and hard work of the Icelandic people but also because you, the international community, lent us important support.

This is perhaps the *punctum saliens*. In a globalised world, we have to tackle problems globally, together. We need to fight together the corruption that contributed to the international recession; to ensure that the financial czars are not allowed to speculate again with peoples' lives, to obliterate the tax-havens they used, and we need to lock arms to create a sound global regulatory framework.

The world has to fight the recession together – in the spirit of the United Nations.

Mr. President,

Earlier in the week I participated in the Summit on climate change. It touched my heart to hear the president of Kiribati describe the plight of his country, which might be obliterated from the face of the earth by the drastic climatic changes. He asked for the only thing that every human and every nation deserve. He asked for justice.

The best way to give that justice to the people of Kiribati, to the nations of the small islands in the South Pacific and elsewhere, to future generations, is to put all our efforts into reaching a decision on a legally binding agreement in Copenhagen that will strike to the core of the problem.

The best way to convince the sceptics to take that step is to highlight success stories. We have to show that our goals are realistic and achievable.

At the beginning of the general debate we heard President Lula present the success of Brazil in the sustainable use of energy resources. Let me tell you about the success of Iceland.

A generation ago, we were as dependent on imported fossil fuel as any other nation. A generation later, 80 % of our energy needs are met by renewables. All our heating, all our electricity is 100 % renewable.

What we did was to use the treasures that were under our feet, and before our very eyes: Hydro and geothermal. What we did, others can do.

I want especially to draw your attention to the vastly underestimated possibilities in geothermal. Many of the countries of the African Rift Valley have similar potential as Iceland does. In South-East Asia we have the greatest geothermal potential in the world. Latin America has valuable potential too.

Many of these countries could, for example with Icelandic expertise, achieve a clean energy transformation.

What we need is a global climatic fund to transfer renewable technologies to the developing countries to enable them to continue growing – on a sustainable, renewable basis.

Our Icelandic expertise is available, and I like to add, that despite our present difficulties we have safeguarded the geothermal training program of the United Nations University in Iceland. It remains open to you.

Mr. President,

Climate change is also exerting drastic effects on the Arctic. Iceland, the only state that lies entirely within the arctic region, is designating the Arctic as one of the main areas of her foreign policy. Soon a great part of the Arctic Ocean may be ice-free at the end of summer. This will open a new pathway for transportation between the Pacific and the Atlantic – with great benefits to trade. For better or worse it will also facilitate access to vast resources in the Arctic. But we must tread very carefully – the Arctic also possesses the most fragile ecosystem of the world. It will be a challenge to strike the right balance between this fragile environment and the use of its resources. We believe that it is very important these challenges be addressed regionally through the Arctic Council. And any territorial claims should be settled on basis of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.

The climatic changes are also likely to have negative effects on the fishing stocks of the world. More than a billion people depend on fish as their main source of protein. 95% of those live in developing countries. As you know, Iceland's track-record in the sustainable management of fishing stocks is second to none. In this field, as in the geothermal, we also have technological expertise to share to ensure better use of the fishing stocks in times of difficult climatic changes.

In this respect, I am happy to tell you that despite our financial woes we have ensured that the UN University's Fisheries Training Programme in Iceland is fully funded – and available to you.

Mr. President,

During this week I have heard a lot of speakers criticize the UN. But I would like to use this opportunity to praise the work of the UN. The UN has done well in times when the odds have sometimes been heavily stacked against. I want especially to take two examples – out of a great many.

My government has strongly endorsed the rights of women. We have especially taken to our heart the Security Council's resolution 1325 on the rights of women to take part and be active in the peace processes in war-torn regions. Next year is the 10th anniversary of 1325, and I urge the UN to actively use it to promote the role of women as peacemakers all over the world. In this context the unanimous decision of the General Assembly to create a new and consolidated UN gender unity to be headed by an Under-Secretary was also very helpful. We thank you all for these important steps and urge the Secretary-General to move forward as expeditiously as possible.

The other cause of my gratitude is the unanimous decision of the Security Council to call for global efforts to stop the spread for nuclear arms and to boost disarmament. I remember when I was a very young editor in 1986 when President Reagan and Secretary Gorbachev met in Reykjavik. I'll never forget that for the first time in my life a world free of a nuclear nightmare became a realistic goal. This is a goal that must be vigorously pursued, it is strongly supported by my government, and I am grateful to the UN for providing the framework for that.

There are other happy events from these first days of mine at the UN. It was invigorating to hear president Barack Obama boldly describe his vision of a peace agreement in the Middle-East based on the two-state solution and the cessation of all settlements. His strong declaration has created a fresh political momentum that must not be allowed to fade away.

Mr. President,

Iceland is a small nation, but we have a lot to offer:

- Our expertise in geothermal can be of vital importance against a climatic crisis.
- Our experience in sustainable fishing can be instrumental to stave off depletion of stocks.

- Our geopolitical position in the Arctic and our cohabitation with it for more than a millennium can be of great value to strike the right balance between a fragile ecosystem and use of its resources.

True, the crisis destroyed financial assets but Iceland's *real assets* remain intact, natural resources, human capital, and social welfare.

This is why I am so confident, that although Iceland was the first to fall victim to the global financial crisis, she will very soon be on her feet again.