



REPUBLIC OF KIRIBATI

Statement

by

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President of the Republic of Kiribati

General Debate

65th United Nations General Assembly

25 September 2010

(Check against delivery)

Mr. President

Excellencies;

Mr. Secretary General

Distinguished delegates

Ladies and gentlemen

Kam na bane ni mauri!

Every year we gather in this great Hall of this great organisation to take stock of our achievements in the pursuit of a more peaceful, a more secure and a better world for all citizens of our global community.

As it emerged from the ashes of devastating world wars, the United Nations heralded in a new era and a new world order of international cooperation in the pursuit of international peace and security. It is premised on the principles of sovereign equality and peaceful co-existence.

Taking stock of what we have achieved since then we can say today that we have been successful in preventing many of scourges that have challenged humanity including world wars, widespread disease. But as we rid our global society of those injustices, new and emerging forms of injustices now threaten our global security.

Climate Change

Mr. President,

I believe climate change remains the greatest moral challenge of our time..While it affects all nations of this planet the irony is it is the poorest and the smallest countries with the least contribution of greenhouse gases which are paying the ultimate price in order that the lifestyles and development agenda of some countries may be maintained. Where is the justice in that?

Mr. President,

Copenhagen failed to meet the expectations of many but especially those countries on the frontline for whom the threat of climate change is not a matter of speculation but one of survival now and therefore of great urgency. There is a tendency in much of the world to view climate change as a distant and gradual process the harmful effects of which are remote possibilities and not worthy of much attention. I have said at forum after forum that for low lying island countries like Kiribati, Tuvalu, the Maldives, and the Marshall Islands, among other similarly vulnerable countries, climate change is a matter of survival and of increasing urgency. Already we are witnessing major damages to infrastructure and property as a consequence of higher than normal tides and storm surges. Coastal erosion in heavily populated areas is occurring at a rate that exceeds Government's capacity to respond. Lack of resources is exacerbating the situation - coastlines continue to be eroded as homes and properties continue to be damaged. Long before our islands are inundated by the rising seas, they will become uninhabitable as freshwater aquifers are contaminated by saltwater intrusion from rising tides. Increasing demands for resources to undertake effective responses to climate change impacts will become dominant features of our development agenda. I truly hope therefore that I can, during this session, communicate the deep sense of urgency and growing sense of despair besetting our people in the face of this oncoming catastrophe.

On the basis of the current scientific projections the Copenhagen Accord does not provide the means to guarantee our future survival and we therefore did not sign it at Copenhagen. Subsequently we have associated ourselves with the Accord essentially for the following reasons. Firstly, the belief that the Accord at least represented a positive step towards an international governance system on climate change. Secondly, the expectation that further scientific evidence which will be forthcoming will unequivocally determine the targets to be agreed upon. Finally, and most importantly, the undertaking that our support for the Accord will ensure the flow of urgently needed adaptation funds. We regret to say that up to now we have not been able to access any of the fast-start funds pledged.

I acknowledge that many elements of any international regime on climate change will take several years to conclude but I also believe that there are common grounds on which there is no real debate. The urgent need for the flow of adaptation funds to address the more urgent adaptation needs of the most vulnerable countries is a matter over which there is general consensus. It is not a matter for negotiation or to procrastinate over otherwise it will be too late for some countries and any subsequent agreement will be meaningless. It is also important that adaptation funds should not be regarded as additional development funds by either development partner or recipient countries, but must be provided and applied for the sole purpose of adaptation to climate change.

I believe we need to modify our approach to Mexico if we are to succeed. I believe that we have a moral obligation to reach agreement on a legally binding framework that regulates our ability to pursue policies that harm others. For very obvious reasons, I do not believe that any country should have sovereignty over its greenhouse gas emissions. In my view any alternative to a legally binding framework is simply unacceptable and would have potentially destabilizing consequences.

Experience at Copenhagen taught us that if we are to make any progress we must acknowledge our differences and discuss ways around them rather than allow them to dominate the international agenda behind the process. In this regard, trust and mutual respect are indispensable to the process.

Climate change offers the international community an opportunity to reflect upon the future directions of our relations as sovereign countries. I believe the climate change challenge provides us with the opportunity to be more *innovative* in our concept of international governance – our current arrangement is similar to state governments not accepting federal authority in a federal system. Imagine the chaos!

Sustainable Development

Mr. President,

While other countries are focussing their efforts and resources on their sustainable development, we, in the most vulnerable countries, continue to spend the limited resources we have in fighting the continuous onslaught of the rising seas and storm surges on our homes and livelihoods.

It is no surprise therefore that we are off track in the achievement of most of the Millennium Development Goals and the implementation of our sustainable development agenda under our National Development Plan, the Pacific Plan and the Mauritius Strategy of Implementation. For every step we take forward we are knocked back two or three due to challenges we face exacerbated by climate change. In this regard, it is imperative that pledges made in Copenhagen for fast-start funds to assist vulnerable countries like Kiribati to adapt to the impact of climate change and sea level rise are mobilised at the earliest opportunity. This is a matter of great and increasing urgency.

PIPA, Pacific Oceanscape and Pacific Ocean 2020 Challenge

Mr. President,

We acknowledge the critical role of our environment as the pillar of sustainable development. Maintaining the health of our biodiversity within our oceans and ecosystems are the very same challenges which we have so far failed to address in respect of our atmosphere. It is imperative therefore that we undertake the commitment to put in place now the measures needed in order to avoid the mistakes we have made with climate change. In pursuit of this we have, in Kiribati, designated as the largest marine protected area and marine World Heritage Site – the Phoenix Islands Protected Area (PIPA). PIPA covers an area of over 400,000 square kilometres representing over 11 percent of our Exclusive Economic Zone. PIPA is a result of collaborative partnership with Conservation International and New England Aquarium. It provides a natural breeding ground for tropical fishery and ocean ecosystems. It is a natural laboratory for the study of such ecosystems and climate change impact in a pristine area virtually untouched by human hands. The preservation of this area is our gift to humanity and our contribution to international biodiversity conservation efforts to significantly reduce biodiversity loss by this the International Year of Biodiversity. Even now as we confront the possibility that our islands will become uninhabitable within the century due to rising sea levels, we recognise the value of protecting something that is the common heritage of humanity.

Mr. President,

Kiribati and the Pacific are committed to the sustainable conservation and management of its ocean ecosystem through the Micronesia Challenge, the Coral Triangle Initiative, the Nauru Agreement and the many other national efforts

throughout the region in conserving biodiversity and ecosystems. At their meeting last month in Vanuatu, the Pacific Islands Forum endorsed the Pacific Oceanscape Framework which promotes collaboration and cooperation amongst marine protected areas in the Pacific region. Initiatives such as the Pacific 2020 Challenge and a novel PANGEA World concept of green development through knowledge economies link these initiatives to the Pacific Rim countries and beyond, respectively.

Our message to the international community is that conservation of biodiversity and ecosystems in the Pacific is not only important to the sustainable development of Pacific peoples; it is of vital importance to the rest of the world. Support from the international community in protecting ecosystems in the Pacific and indeed elsewhere should not be viewed as a hand out but as an investment for future generations of this planet.

A New World Order

Mr. President,

Last year, we all called for a new world order. We all acknowledged that our great organisation must evolve to reflect the realities of our time. A time in which new and emerging security threats and injustices such as climate change are challenging the credibility of our international system of governance; a time in which the future survival of some nations are seriously in question; a time when all those countries with the ability to do so must contribute to the prevention of this calamity or be forever judged in history.

We note that tensions remain high in certain regions notably in the Middle East and the Korean peninsula. Let us pray for the sake of those of us on the frontline of the major global challenges that greater understanding and stability would prevail. For

whilst we, as small nations, may seem not to be affected by these events, they do serve to distract the focus of attention away from the real challenges facing the international community and our planet today. It is gratifying to note the easing of tensions and improvement of relations across the Taiwan straits, no doubt a most welcome development for all in the region. We also welcome the inclusion of Taiwan in the World Health Assembly and hope that similar understanding will prevail in respect of other international institutions where Taiwan can participate and contribute meaningfully for the good of humanity.

Conclusion

As we chart the path towards a new world order, we must address the fundamental threats to the very existence of the units that make up our organisation. We must, as the so called community of nations, be able to guarantee the survival of members of our community by addressing this **“defining challenge of our era”**. Climate change must be resolved before it is too late for the frontline nations and for the whole of humanity.

We need compassionate, visionary and responsible leadership at this time to direct our path towards a more secure and just world. We need to share the solution and we need to act as one in Mexico. We owe it to our future generations to act and to act soon. Maintaining the status quo is simply not an option.