

New Zealand Permanent Mission to the United Nations



Te Māngai o Aotearoa

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General Debate Statement

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Minister of Foreign Affairs

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Mr President

I bring greetings from the South Pacific.

For the past year New Zealand has had the privilege of chairing the Pacific Islands Forum - a regional body that represents some of the smallest and most vulnerable states on this planet.

For us this has been an important responsibility.

Because we are a small country with modest resources, we choose to focus much of our attention on our own region.

Over 60% of our ODA is spent in our own neighbourhood.

Serving as Pacific Islands Forum Chair has caused us to reflect on the role of regional organisations, and also on the extent to which we all depend upon the United Nations for solutions to challenges that are truly global in character.

I say with some confidence that we have been making good progress in dealing with those challenges that are capable of regional solutions.

But I must also say that we need and expect more from this institution.

The Pacific Islands Forum has sixteen members, of which fourteen are small island states.

I was pleased to attend this week the first meeting between the UN Secretary-General and Pacific Islands Forum Leaders, which I hope will mark a new era of enhanced high level engagement between this organisation and our region, and a greater understanding of our needs.

The Pacific has had its share of stability and security challenges in recent times.

As a region, we have done reasonably well in dealing with them.

Most recently it has been in the Solomon Islands that a regional initiative has been required.

The regional assistance mission, RAMSI, has involved a truly regional approach, with the participation of police and other personnel from every member of the Pacific Islands Forum.

And I am pleased to report that the security element of that initiative has been scaled down and will soon be fully withdrawn.

But there is also more this organisation, particularly the Security Council, can do to acknowledge and support regional leadership, in the Pacific and elsewhere, on peace and security matters.

Concerns about democracy, the rule of law and human rights are not mere abstract considerations within the Pacific.

These principles have been challenged in a number of states, most notably in recent years in Fiji.

In that respect I am pleased to report that progress is being made towards the holding of elections in 2014, and that support has been forthcoming to ensure that such elections are free and fair.

Stability and security issues are not the only priorities for our regional body.

In our year as Forum Chair, New Zealand chose to focus on a number of development priorities, two of which I wish to mention in my remarks today.

For many of the poorer states within our region, their fisheries resource is the major economic asset they hold.

Yet due to illegal fishing practices, unreported catch and inadequate management regimes, these countries have received far too small a return on the resource.

Because of the highly migratory character of the tuna resource, this truly is a matter requiring regional management and solid progress is being made in such areas as improved surveillance, the training of monitors, and improved management practices, both to protect the last really healthy fishery on the planet, and to ensure that its owners receive their fair share of the resource they own.

One of the highest priorities within our region is the need for practical initiatives in the area of renewable energy.

Ours is a region heavily dependent upon fossil fuels for the generation of electricity.

The cost of expensive imported diesel on most small Pacific economies is absolutely crippling.

The climate change impact is obvious.

After a decade of climate change conferences and hundreds of millions of dollars in so-called climate change initiatives, one might be forgiven for imagining that the Pacific, over-endowed as it is with good sunlight, would be by now positively festooned with solar power plants.

Sadly, Mr President, I must report that this is not in fact the case.

Indeed, one of the most striking features of our region has been the complete lack of progress in putting lofty climate change rhetoric into any form of renewable energy practice.

In our year as chair of the regional body we have set out to correct this serious shortcoming.

A small but important illustration lies in our work in the tiny Tokelau Islands.

Until now, Tokelau has been 100% dependent upon fossil fuels for the generation of electricity.

By the end of this year – 2012 – Tokelau will be over 90% resourced with renewable solar electricity.

Good progress has been made too in Tonga, where I recently participated in the opening of a solar plant supplying around 20% of the electricity requirements of the main island, Tongatapu.

And we are working with the Cook Islands government to assist in meeting their bold aspiration of 50% renewable electricity by 2015, mostly through solar initiatives.

These New Zealand-funded programmes are an important part of our overall commitment in the region.

Our parting legacy from our year in the Chair of the regional body is a renewable energy pledging conference to be held early next year with the objective of matching donors, suppliers of concessional and commercial finance, and others with the renewable energy plans of our Pacific neighbours.

Here I must acknowledge the commitment of the European Union in co-leading this initiative, and the support of the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, and the governments of Australia, the United States and others who are generously supporting this initiative.

Mr President, while there is much that can be achieved by regional action; we must acknowledge that sometimes regional solutions are just not enough.

That goes right to the heart of the very reason for the existence of this organisation.

My point is most vividly illustrated today in relation to Syria.

It would be difficult for me to overstate the level of frustration of the people I represent with the complete inability of the United Nations Security Council to act in relation to Syria.

And it would be even more difficult to overstate the extent to which the Security Council is at risk of losing its credibility in the eyes of reasonable and fair minded people through its inability to act.

People in my country ask a very simple question:

If 25,000 deaths, countless thousands injured, and many more thousands displaced and homeless, is not enough to get the Security Council to act, then what does it take?

What does it take?

I welcome the leadership which the Arab League and Arab States have shown on this issue – as we have also seen on some of the other difficult issues in their region.

And I welcome the fact that the General Assembly has been looking for opportunities to be more engaged.

In the absence of leadership from the Security Council, I suggest that this Assembly will need to find ways to play a more activist role.

But from all of this, the case for reform of the Security Council has become utterly compelling.

Indeed, increasingly, the future credibility of the United Nations may depend upon it.

If we are to make progress in that respect we will need to see members move past the extravagant attempts to maximise individual positions and try to find some meaningful, practical reforms that actually hold the prospect of widespread support.

I represent a small nation of practical, constructive people.

And it is because we seek practical, constructive reform that our Government supports the so-called intermediate solution: the creation of a new category of seat for the group of larger countries that feel under-represented in comparison with the P5, but seats they would need to win in open elections – to make them fully accountable to the broader membership.

I do not intend in these remarks to canvass other specific proposals we would like to see considered – with one exception:

There are now compelling reasons for us to ask the P5 to voluntarily accept restrictions on the use of veto.

To go further, and seek its abolition is pointless – it simply will not happen.

But to ask the P5 to acknowledge and respect the genuine concerns of the wider membership by voluntarily accepting a curb on the exercise of the veto, is an entirely reasonable and achievable objective.

My country was one of those that led the opposition to the veto when this institution was being established; indeed, it was the only Charter issue that was forced to a vote.

The permanent members argued at that stage that the veto was necessary in order to protect their vital national interests.

Yet today, we routinely see the exercise of the veto in circumstances which have little to do with national interests.

My request to the five permanent members is simply that they stick with what they said in 1945.

And my challenge to them today is to consider a process by which they collectively and voluntarily agree to confine their use of the veto to those issues that clearly and directly affect their vital national interests; and that they voluntarily agree not to use their veto in situations involving mass atrocities.

Mr President, while on the topic of the Security Council, I take the opportunity to urge the Council and relevant organs of the General Assembly to respond positively to requests from ECOWAS for support in dealing with the conflict in Mali and the Sahel.

Too often we have seen the Security Council fail to make a timely response to requests for help – in Rwanda, in Guinea, in Darfur and in Somalia.

Too often it has been a case of too little, too late.

In all of these cases we have seen good leadership from the African Union – and that leadership deserves a timely and constructive response from New York.

Many of you will be aware that New Zealand is an energetic candidate for election to the Security Council for the 2015-16 term.

You will hear more from us on these topics over the next two years.

We are a small country, with a big voice, and an approach that is fair minded and constructive.

Mr President, in the past few days this Assembly has heard from both Prime Minister Netanyahu, and President Abbas.

We are now on notice that the issue of Palestinian status in the UN will come before this Assembly this session.

We look forward to seeing the text of a resolution, and engaging in the consultations that have been signalled.

I said earlier that New Zealanders are constructive and practical.

They are also fair minded people; and they expect to see their Government bring all of those attributes to the consideration of this resolution – and that we will do.

Having said that, let me also be clear that we see such a resolution as a very poor substitute for the direct discussions that need to occur between two leaders who live half an hour down the road from each other.

In his address to this Assembly earlier this week Prime Minister Netanyahu set out clearly the grave implications for the Middle East – and for the global community more generally - of a nuclear 'break out' in the region.

Like other Member States, New Zealand believes Iran must be told to step back from a course that risks a further dangerous escalation of the situation.

And we hope the international community will stand firm in sending this message.

In return, however, I suggest it is fair for the international community to make a request of Prime Minister Netanyahu.

And that is to put a hold on the settlements, at the very least while negotiations proceed, and engage in the direct talks with his Palestinian counterpart that represent the only basis for a durable solution to this issue, and an essential step in removing the seeds of wider conflict in the region.

Mr President: I remind the Assembly that these are very difficult times for Governments around the world.

Budget economies have affected Foreign Ministries, my own included.

It is only fair that we should in turn ask this large institution to find economies and improved working methods in order to deliver better value for our taxpayers.

Smaller countries like New Zealand depend more than most on good multi-lateral institutions.

We need a United Nations that is modern, efficient and able to meet changing needs.

We all need a Security Council that is more responsive to the needs of the wider membership, and more effective at dealing with the significant challenges we all confront today.