



REPUBLIC OF KIRIBATI

Statement

By

His Excellency Anote Tong

President of the Republic of Kiribati, at the General Debate of

the 67th Session of the United Nations General Assembly

Wednesday, 26 September 2012

(Check against delivery)

Mr President;

Excellencies;

Mr Secretary-General;

Distinguished delegates;

Ladies and gentlemen

Kam na bane n mauri!

I bring warm greetings from the people of Kiribati, on whose behalf I am privileged to once again address this august body.

Mr President,

I join with those who have gone before me in congratulating you on assuming the Presidency of the 67th session of the General Assembly. We find ourselves in challenging times. The work ahead of us this session reflects those challenges. I am confident that, under your able leadership, this organisation will continue its work to improve the quality of life for all members of our global community, in particular those who are most vulnerable.

Let me also take this opportunity to acknowledge with appreciation the commendable leadership of your predecessor, Mr Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser, during the last session of the General Assembly.

I also recognise the unwavering dedication of our Secretary-General, Mr Ban Ki-moon. With his hand on the tiller, he continues to steer our organisation towards our objectives, through the complex realities and challenges facing our world. In particular, I would like to acknowledge with deep appreciation his

personal commitment to the issue of climate change and the plight of the most vulnerable. We welcomed the Secretary-General to Kiribati last year – the first visit by anyone in his position. We were grateful for the opportunity to show him first hand the challenges of living on the front line of climate change.

Mr. President,

In your opening statement yesterday, you reminded us that the core function of this organisation is the maintenance of peace and security. It is important that we all reflect on what we have done as individuals to achieve a more peaceful, secure and better world. We must ask ourselves if what we are doing is in the collective interest of all the world's peoples, or just a select few. We must look at our efforts as leaders of this global family, and ask ourselves if we are doing the right thing for our children and their children.

I firmly believe that, with all the information available to us today, we know exactly what needs to be done. We know what we have to do but, for whatever reason, we lack the courage and the vision to do it. We lack a sense of responsibility for each other. We are not willing to step out of our comfort zones and make the necessary sacrifices for the security and future of all members of our family.

It is never too late to do the right thing. History throws up many examples where global action has resulted in global good. We have managed to secure a relatively peaceful world. We have been able to address major injustices of the past, particularly those of slavery and apartheid. We have come together to face down those who seek to achieve their objectives through terrorist means.

However, we must remain vigilant, as new and emerging forms of security threats and injustices arise to threaten our global family.

Climate Change

Mr President,

This is the seventh time I have had the honour to address this Assembly in my nine years as President of Kiribati. Each time I have sought to convey the same message. Each time I have spoken of the real and existential threat to my nation. Each time I have reminded you of the need for urgent action to address climate change and sea level rise, to ensure the long-term survival of Kiribati.

I frequently find myself watching my grandchildren and wondering what sort of a future we are leaving them. For their sake, climate change is an issue that I will continue to talk about for as long as I have breath in my body. This is a critical issue for the survival of our people and for all of humanity. It remains the greatest moral challenge of our time.

Whether or not we are willing to acknowledge it, climate change and sea level rise are a result of the unsustainable use of our planet's resources. Economic growth at all costs must not be our mantra, particularly when it is those who will benefit the least from this growth that will pay the ultimate price. The earth is not ours to do with as we please – we are merely trustees for future generations. We ignore this reality at our peril.

Mr President,

This great organisation was founded on a fundamental principle of sovereign equality. Security issues affecting each one of us must be given due recognition. We are grateful that the General Assembly agrees that climate change is a matter warranting the attention of the Security Council. I applaud the commitment of our Secretary-General to this particular security threat, but he needs the support of all nations to take the necessary action to address it.

We must step up our collective efforts to mitigate global greenhouse gas emissions. We continue to urge major greenhouse gas emitters to do their part. We also urge development partners to provide the appropriate level of resources and technology to enable us to deal with the current impacts of climate change and sea level rise, and to prepare for an uncertain future.

While we are taking adaptation measures, to ensure that Kiribati remains habitable for as long as possible, we are also preparing for a future where our islands may no longer be able to sustain our population. We are looking to improve the skills of our people to a level where they are able to compete for jobs in the international labour market. We want our people to have the option to migrate with dignity should the time come that migration is unavoidable. And all the science is telling us that it is just a matter of time.

Mr President,

We note some positive progress made at the recent climate change talks in Bangkok, building on the decisions made in Durban last year. However, action has been too slow in coming. We inch along, when it is great strides that are

required. On those issues where we have consensus we must move to implement agreed action without delay, while we continue our discussions on those matters that remain contentious. If we wait for agreement on everything then it will be too late to do anything.

Sustainable Development

Mr President,

It should not come as a surprise that we are off-track on many of the Millennium Development Goals. While other countries are focussing their efforts and resources on their efforts to meet the MDGs, we, in the most vulnerable countries, continue to spend a disproportionate level of our limited resources fighting the onslaught of the rising seas and storm surges on our homes, livelihoods and public infrastructure. This is a costly exercise that we cannot afford. We continue to rely on the goodwill of our partners and members of our global family in this regard.

Mr President,

We are a nation of water. We are a large ocean island State. We believe that given the right support we can achieve sustainable development through utilising the available resources of our vast Exclusive Economic Zone. We believe that through this we can reduce our reliance on development assistance. I am convinced that we may even be able to do away with development assistance altogether, if we are provided with the support we need now to develop our capacity to harvest and process our own resources.

Fisheries remains a major economic resource for my country, providing between 40 and 50 per cent of our revenue. Our aspiration is to maximise returns from this resource, given the current rate of return of around 5 to 8 per cent. We have started on this with the establishment of our first fish processing plant through a public/private partnership.

Seabed mining is another potential source of revenue. However we are mindful of the need to take a precautionary approach towards this particular activity, given the potential damage it could cause to our pristine marine environment.

We acknowledge the fundamental role of our environment as a pillar of sustainable development. Maintaining the health and biodiversity of our oceans and ecosystems will be critical. Our contribution to these efforts is the Phoenix Islands Protected Area or PIPA, one of the world's largest marine protected areas. We have set aside this area as a haven for marine biodiversity. This is our gift to humanity. We recognise the value in protecting our common heritage.

Mr President

Ocean conservation is beyond the resources of any single country. Collaboration on cross-border initiatives is essential to advancing our efforts in this regard. At the recent Pacific Islands Forum in the Cook Islands, the United States and Kiribati announced plans to collaborate in building links between our adjoining marine parks in the Phoenix Islands, under the umbrella of the Phoenix Ocean Arc. This effort is our joint contribution to the Pacific Oceanscape Framework. We invite the international community to partner with us in this endeavour.

Our message to the international community is that conservation of biodiversity and marine 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. The international community needs to support these efforts, not as a hand-out but as an investment for this planet's future generations.

The Future We Want

Mr President,

In June we met in Rio de Janeiro to review our progress 20 years on from the 1992 Earth Summit. Twenty years ago we agreed that the protection of our global environment was critical for our future survival, and the pursuit of development must be based on long-term sustainability of our natural resources. Unfortunately our track record in delivering on our undertakings has not been good. In fact, in many respects our environment is worse off today than it was 20 years ago. The fine balance keeping our planetary ecosystem together has been adversely affected by our pursuit of individual benefits at the expense of the collective good. While some members of our global family continue to benefit from the unsustainable exploitation of resources others are paying the ultimate price. We do not believe that there is justice in that.

We renewed our commitment in June to achieving the future we want. This future will require our organisation to evolve to reflect 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 is 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 by history. If we are to provide a secure, peaceful and prosperous future for all our children then we must go beyond 'business as usual' and deliver now. In fact, we should have delivered yesterday.

Mr. President,

We accept the reality that during these uncertain times there is need for the United Nations to remain as relevant and responsive as possible to the ever changing needs and challenges of this world. In a discussion earlier this morning, I am encouraged to be assured of the Secretary General's commitment to ensure that our organisation is reformed in order to become more efficient, more transparent and more accountable. We also welcome the Secretary General's proposal to strengthen partnership with civil society and the private sector. In fact, I believe this level of partnership must begin from the community and national levels before extending out to the regional and international levels. Mr President,

The fundamental fabric that binds us together as a family; as humanity; is unravelling at the seams. Maintaining security and ensuring the survival of people in conflict areas, particularly in the Middle East and North Africa, remain a major challenge for our organisation. Let us pray for the sake of those on the frontline of the major global challenges that greater understanding and stability will prevail. It is gratifying to note the continued easing of tensions and improvement of relations across the Taiwan straits. We also welcome the inclusion of Taiwan in international processes of the World Health Assembly and hope that similar understanding will prevail in respect of other international

institutions and processes where Taiwan can participate and contribute meaningfully for the good of humanity.

Conclusion

As we chart the path towards a future we want, we must address the fundamental threats to the very existence of the members of this family of nations. We must, as a family, be able to guarantee the survival of members of our community. 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 future. We owe it to our children and their children's children to act and to act soon. So let us pray that God will give us the common sense to do the right thing for the future of humanity.

Thank you!

