



President

REPUBLIC OF THE MARSHALL ISLANDS

**H.E. Ms. Hilda Heine
President
Republic of the Marshall Islands
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Mr. Secretary-General, Mr. President, Excellencies, Ladies & Gentlemen,

I have the honor to bring you the warm greetings of Yokwe on behalf of the people and Government of the Republic of the Marshall Islands.

Every year, world leaders gather at the United Nations to strengthen what binds us all – that despite our vast differences – we get more done when we work together. When we cooperate. As leaders we know and accept that our jobs to improve the well-being of our own peoples cannot in the end be at the expense of others and we simply cannot leave any one behind.

As a low-lying island nation, the Paris Agreement on climate change shows this international spirit of cooperation and inter-dependency. I used to be a teacher. So I implore those of you who have not ratified the Paris Agreement to do so as your next homework from this week! It is imperative that Paris enter into force this year. Of course, I know that Paris is not perfect. We need to do more to increase ambition, on mitigation, on adaptation and on finance. We must take every opportunity we can to stay below 1.5 degree limit needed for our survival.

Mr. President,

I congratulate you on your election as the first President from a Pacific island country.

I speak to you today as the first woman leader of an independent Pacific small island nation. In the Pacific, it is often women, and mothers, who are the heart of our communities and ensure resilience. If women do not plan for the long term, families and communities do not thrive. And it follows that if Pacific island nations fail to plan, it is also the rest of the world who will suffer the loss of our vast fisheries and oceans. And if world leaders act only for short-term gain, than we will rob our youngest and future generations of their rightful inheritance.

I have traveled to the United Nations to share our Marshallese story of how we - a small island nation – and a large ocean nation - is defining our future on our terms. As a former UN Trusteeship – whose well-being was once entrusted to this very body – it is important that we do not take this journey alone, but with the firm partnership of the international community.

First, our progress must be built on our education, to ensure our young people have the tools to lead our future, and to achieve the UN's Sustainable Development Goal 4 on quality education. As an educator, I know how important it is that we turn around low indicators, and provide an adequate education to all, not only by continuing to improve our own teacher qualifications, but to design a curriculum which also emphasizes our own Marshallese language and ways of being. We must define ourselves with our own words and customs. I am proud to announce a new research partnership with Columbia University Teachers College which will not only assist with our own bilingual education, but inspire us to serve as a model for others around the world.

Second, our future must be underpinned by our own economic security and progress towards the UN's Sustainable Development Goal 1 (to end poverty), goal 8 (economic growth), and goal 10 (to reduce inequality). For too long we have been largely reliant on the assistance of others. And while this has provided an important backstop for basic social development, it has also undermined our self-dependence. We face serious challenges as a small island state, but have also unexplored potential to grow.

We must move towards a serious expansion of the private sector, to create jobs and strengthen our own national benefit from sustainable resources, especially our fisheries and port state role, as well as tourism and copra. As we consider all of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (the SDGs) – as we think all the way out to 2030, and consider the mid-points, including 2023 – we must not only be ambitious with policy, but also to define the solid financial pathway needed to get there. And right now, our short term economic risk up to, and beyond, 2023 is simply unacceptable, as we transition to a new trust fund. So much has been said recently at the UN about “innovative finance” and building development and resiliency through private investment – and instead of doubting how those apply to my nation – I instead issue a stark challenge to ourselves and our partners – work closely with us to chart our new economic future to 2023 and beyond, with creative solutions to difficult problems. If we are all truly serious about tackling the UN SDGs, let's truly find solutions for (quote) “island-tailored innovative finance.”

Third, our own national growth and well-being must be driven by a commitment to improve delivery on basic social development – our health, food security and environment, especially targeting the most vulnerable groups in our islands: elderly, those with disabilities and single parents. The Marshall Islands has the highest rates of diabetes incidence in the world – it is a national crisis and our consumption of sugary food and beverages is literally killing us. Our environment is challenged by the overwhelming amount of plastic, metal cans, and trappings of the modern western world. And as if our local communities do not have enough challenges, our vulnerability to natural hazards and climate-driven events, like droughts and coastal flooding – will be far worse in the future – even with strong efforts to curb global emissions under the Paris Agreement.

Even with the issue of our very survival on the line - we are committed to addressing these challenges with immediate action including towards UN SDG Goal 7 - affordable energy, Goal 3 on good health, Goal 6 for Clean Water, and Goal 11 for sustainable communities. To counter diabetes, our parliament is considering a sharp increase of import taxes on sugar added beverages. We are taking forward – and implementing with international support – a disaster risk reduction plan and measures. Our parliament is considering a national ban on plastic bags, on implementing recycling to clean our local communities and provide a modest stream of income along the way. We are tasking our environment agency not only to address water quality, but water security. We are moving on practical measures to reduce our costly reliance on oil – through sustainable transport, and more efficient and renewable energy. We cannot – and will not – ignore our pressing future risks.

As in many parts of the world, sadly, domestic violence is a serious issue in the Pacific. UN SDG Goal 5 commits to ending worldwide domestic violence against women and girls, and my government is moving forward with our own commitment to build safe houses – the first one to be known as Weto In Mour, for abused women. And it may be that the Pacific – and the world – must adjust to a new era, where the voice of women and girls gains its rightful place in community, home, and all levels of politics – from the local to the UN.

Our Pacific ocean defines us, and underpins UN SDG Goal 14. If we fail to conserve and realize a more equitable return from our rich fisheries, not only will our future be threatened, but we risk undermining global food security. We are committed to the protection and sustainable use of our fisheries and ocean resources – but our own good intentions are not enough – and it is well past time that distant fishing nations, and the global superpowers who dominate our fisheries, look beyond their plenary statements and into the real world impact of many of their negotiation positions.

Marshallese have come to the UN for nearly 65 years to bring greater attention to the harm caused by nuclear weapons testing – with a legacy and burden shared by few others. And we remain the only instance where the UN ever authorized the specific use of nuclear weapons testing, in resolutions 1082 and 1493 – which the UN has never acknowledged.

Not many people in the world know our own deep experiences with nuclear detonation, and what these weapons did to my country and the Marshallese people.

Most of us would think about nuclear weapons only as weapons of mass destruction, and only of wartime images of buildings that are leveled, and the incineration of all living things. But how many in the world would have truly experienced what we have – the physical, mental, environmental and cultural burdens which last for generations – and the dislocation of our people from their ancestral islands? These are not mere historical events.

As the UN Special Rapporteur affirmed in 2012, these are fundamental human rights issues – and that the international community “has an ongoing obligation to encourage a final and just resolution.” Words without action do our people no benefit – I am committing my administration towards a renewed focus on nuclear impact issues. And I feel I have every right to not only ask, but to demand, full assistance and tangible results from the international community, and UN system.

In light of our experience, it is our fervent hope that such weapons of mass destruction shall never again be tested or unleashed, and that all nuclear-armed nations will have the necessary political will and empathy to disarm,

I appeal to the government of North Korea to halt any further nuclear weapons tests and to achieve full nuclear disarmament.

And finally, my government will follow through on our commitment to UN SDG Goal 16 for justice, and to the UN Human Rights Council. We will advance core human rights treaties for ratification at the next session of our parliament – many of these treaties are already captured in our Constitution, and affirm basic freedoms enjoyed worldwide.

These basic rights, our national plan, and the UN Sustainable Development Goals, and the identification of major national challenges and priority reforms addressed through my Administration's *RMI Agenda 2020: A Framework for Progress* – must all be one effort.

Mr. President,

I have spent most of my good words today urging that “no one be left behind” and showing our goodwill to play our part. I must also emphasize that the role of Taiwan as a key stakeholder, and its determination to contribute to global affairs, should be better recognized.

I call on the international community to support Taiwan's efforts as an advocate for regional and global stability, peace and dialogue, including in cross-strait relations.

The UN should afford greater commitment to ensuring Taiwan's fundamental right to participate in mechanisms, meetings and activities of UN specialized agencies, and Taiwan should be recognized for its strong contribution in working with us and others towards the SDGs.

Given the importance of human rights to my country, I request that the UN Human Rights Council initiate a credible and independent investigation of alleged human rights violations in West Papua.

Mr. President,

In closing, we must turn words into reality and move forward with a renewed and deeper focus on long-held priorities – a commitment from my government, and also an urgent call for international partnership.

Thank you and kम्मol tata.