



**Remarks by The Honorable Gustav N. Aitaro
Minister of State (Foreign Affairs) of the Republic of Palau
General Debate of the Seventy-Seventh Session of the General Assembly
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Mr. President,
Secretary-General,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I bring greetings from our President Surangel Whipps Jr. and the people of Palau. It is a great pleasure to be able to address this esteemed assembly, and at the outset, I wish to congratulate the President of this 77th General Assembly, Csaba Korosi, and pledge Palau's support during the course of your tenure. I also wish to thank the President of the 76th General Assembly, a fellow islander from the Maldives who was gracious enough to take the long journey to Palau during his term, Honorable Minister Abdullah Shahid, for his astute leadership over the course of the last year.

Friends, we meet at a precarious time. Thankfully, the world has made great strides in collectively combating the COVID-19 pandemic. The people of Palau thank all our international partners and friends who came to our aid during this difficult time, particularly the United States, Japan, Taiwan, Australia, and others. The collaboration was successful in minimizing the impact of the pandemic in our small and vulnerable community.

Regrettably, while the world made great progress in pandemic recovery, new and unprecedented challenges have emerged. The war in Ukraine rages on, extolling damage to infrastructure,

homes, schools and cultural sites, killing innocent people, and continuing to terrorize the children of Ukraine. Palau continues to strongly condemn the war in Ukraine, and joins the international community in calling for Russia to withdraw from Ukraine's sovereign borders. We also extend our prayers and solidarity to the people of Ukraine.

While war may be viewed as a heart attack, the climate crisis has been like diabetes, insidious and wearing us down, constantly with consistency, year after year. I'd like to take this opportunity to join fellow leaders to express my country's deepest sympathy with our brothers and sisters in Pakistan, and those impacted by Hurricane Fiona, with respect to the awful climate devastation they have experienced. These catastrophes represent the unfortunate "new normal" for many in Small Island Developing States.

Climate change is not only about hurricanes and floods. It is about droughts. It is about wildfires. It is about our ability to provide drinking water and feed our people when our lakes run dry and our aquaculture facilities and reefs are ravaged by typhoons. We face all of these challenges and more in Palau today. It is our government's inability to buy our children new textbooks or improve their nutrition programs because so much of our fiscal resources and energy is dedicated to address disaster relief. How many times do the people of our island of Kayangel have to rebuild their homes from storms before they give up. How many times does your home have to be swept away before it breaks your spirit?

Despite the challenges in this last year, we have begun to see glimmers of hope in the fight against climate change – youth, the private sector and civil service are more engaged than ever. Over 150,000 young people scaled Glasgow for COP26, provided much needed pressure for leaders to take action, and after 4 failed COPs, the Glasgow Climate Pact was finally adopted. Even large emitting countries like the United States and Australia have finally passed significant legislation to shift their domestic policies. None of these efforts get us to 1.5 degrees yet, but they represent a great step forward and we commend their efforts.

As the Russian-driven energy crisis has shown us, energy independence and renewable energy sources build resiliency into our economies. Palau felt the strain of skyrocketing energy costs

and this is fueling our ambition to achieve 100% transition to renewable energy. In Palau, we have a saying “Sel om tobed el mora buai, em chisngekl mesa blim.” Translated it is like the English idiom “Don’t throw stones in glass houses.” It means before you criticize other people’s actions, look at your own.

It is in this spirit that our President Surangel Whipps Jr. has committed to Palau transitioning to 100% renewable energy by 2032. The message we want to send is clear: despite our small size, our remote location, our lack of access to finance and technology, and the unique vulnerabilities of being a SIDS country, we are committed to moving towards a net-zero carbon world. We are committed because our planet and our children need us ALL to be committed.

Palau extends our sincere thank you to the Government of Japan who has committed a grant to help us update our country’s power grid to allow for this transition to renewables. We are grateful for your continued friendship and support.

Our small country also had the pleasure of Hosting the 7th Our Ocean Conference together with the United States in April of this year - this conference brought together more than 600 participants representing more than 70 foreign delegations and 150 non-state actors. It concluded with 410 commitments worth \$16.35 billion. As a SIDS country, we thought it was particularly important to bring people from all over the world to Palau to show them first-hand the challenges we face as SIDS - whether it’s the plastic pollution, sea level rise or the impact on our fragile corals which underpin our major economic driver of blue tourism. The conference also highlighted the importance of ocean-based climate solutions, including shipping decarbonization, marine nature-based solutions, and offshore renewable energy, in keeping the 1.5-degree global warming target within reach and improving global climate resilience.

We are incredibly grateful for the wonderful partnership of the United States in co-hosting the Our Ocean Conference; the conference was a success in large part to your camaraderie and efforts. We also thank the generosity and support of the Republic of China – Taiwan for upgrading our conference venues; likewise we thank our partner Japan and the Sasakawa

Foundation for their generosity and significant technical support. Many other partners also contributed to make this event a success for climate action.

As a blue ocean state, Palau has always been a leader in oceans issues and we will continue to be. As co-chair of the High-Level Panel for Sustainable Ocean Economy with Norway, we are pleased to have recently welcomed the UK as our 17th member of the ocean panel, and are committed to working with them and all panel members to achieve 100% ocean management, for a sustainable ocean economy in which effective protection, sustainable production and equitable prosperity go hand-in-hand. Palau believes in the 30 by 30 Initiative and urges all member states to adopt management plans with a minimum MPA covering 30% of the EEZ.

As a large ocean state, we don't believe there is a sustainable solution to oceans issues without incorporating management and rules in the high seas. The Pacific is disappointed that the Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction IGC5 efforts could not conclude treaty text, as the preservation and fair and equitable sharing of benefits of biodiversity in areas beyond national jurisdiction is long overdue as an extension of the world's commitment to combatting climate change. The opportunity to establish regional MPAs, build maritime surveillance capacity, and facilitate the transfer of marine technology should not be further delayed. We owe it to our future generations to come together for the sustainable use of mankind's common heritage.

Palau is a champion of the Moratorium on Deep Sea Mining. The deep sea makes up 90% of the marine environment and we cannot allow great harm to come to such biologically rich areas. Before any nation is allowed to contract for deep sea mining projects, the global community must enact serious reform of the ISA and international regulations that comply with UNCLOS' mission to preserve and protect the marine environment.

Let me now turn to an issue that deeply impacts both Palau and SIDS. The adoption of a Multidimensional Vulnerability Index (MVI) cannot just be discussed in financial board rooms, for it has real impacts on the lives of island peoples. UNDP's own MVI analysis found that most SIDS are more vulnerable than their income level would suggest. We don't come here as a proud people asking for handouts; however we need tailored solutions for our problems as SMALL

countries, and meaningful access to financing. Adoption of the MVI facilitates climate action and can bring equity to global financing.

Mr. President, As Members should know, we are in Free Association with the United States via a Compact. In doing so, our people signal that we have shared values with the United States. The United States also promised to help provide for our development needs after Palau gained independence from the US. Since the time our Compact was signed though, some development has occurred – but too little. Our economy has not grown sufficiently and is fragile – as demonstrated by a contraction of more than 30% during the past five years. Much of this is due to the Covid pandemic, but some to geopolitics. We should not be so vulnerable. We have been forced to borrow more than we should have to, and we lack essential infrastructure.

A strength of our association is that it requires the governments of Palau and the U.S. to: periodically reconsider the relationship and its terms, reconsider Palau’s requirements for assistance for public services and economic development, and commits both of our governments to act on the conclusions.

The U.S. has initiated the required 30th Anniversary Review. It’s bureaucracy initially proposed unacceptably inadequate assistance, but President Biden has appointed an envoy who we trust will get his government to at least meet Palau’s minimum needs so that our people can attain a decent standard of living without having to leave. This is essential to enabling the relationship to endure, as my government wants. It hopes that when we next address the General Assembly, we will be able to report an agreement in this regard. We need greater financial and programmatic assistance and will require these for the foreseeable future – and for as long as free association continues – but what we want most are government measures and public and private investment to grow our economy.

We are deeply grateful for the assistance that the U.S. and other governments, such as Taiwan and Japan, have provided, but we need more now, just as we need measures to combat and adapt to climate change’s rising seas. In our case, this includes concrete action to enable our people –

and , right now, especially, our hospital – to move from land that now regularly floods to the land that we have at higher levels.

Mr. President, we continue to view the United Nations as an important mechanism for achieving international peace and security and sustainable development for all countries, but in particular, for the voiceless and most vulnerable.

I reiterate in the strongest terms that this body can demonstrate leadership through accepting Taiwan into the UN system as a valuable contributor to our collective efforts at promoting peace and collaborating on international matters. Just most UN member states accept Taiwan passports, so too should the UN system recognize and incorporate the Taiwanese people and enrich this body with the benefits of their participation. Doing so is a realization of the core principles of the UN Charter. The Taiwanese people are part of the global community and a valuable partner in combating climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic. With the many challenges facing our planet and people, we need every person - including the 23 million people of Taiwan - to be part of the solutions.

When linguists studied our local Palauan language, they discovered that it was anchored in the word “heart” – “beltik er reng” translates into “found heart” means love. We are a people and a culture who navigate with our hearts, and that is the message I’d like to leave you with today. Palau chooses love of self, love of neighbor, love of planet, love as a virtue. We believe that choosing love is our only way forward for collective peace and prosperity.

There is no profit sufficiently large to be worth the price of war or the destruction of our planet. Above all the highs and lows of this year, I trust that this institution will take away the importance of unity and the respect for the rule of law. We are capable of overcoming the immense challenges of our time, but we must do so together.

Mesulang and Thank you.