



Check Against Delivery

Statement by

HONOURABLE HU'AKAVAMEILIKU

PRIME MINISTER of the KINGDOM of TONGA

on the occasion of the

General Debate

**at the Seventy-seventh Session
of the United Nations General Assembly**

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United Nations Headquarters, New York

Mr. President,

It is my honor and privilege to address the United Nations General Assembly for the first time as Prime Minister of Tonga.

I offer my warmest congratulations to you, Mr. President, on your election as President of the 77th session of the United Nations General Assembly.

I assure you of our delegation's full support.

May I also thank your predecessor, Mr. Abdulla Shahid, for his leadership of the Assembly at the 76th Session. He led a Presidency of Hope during unprecedented times.

I also wish to commend the tireless efforts of our Secretary-General, Mr. António Guterres. Thank you, Secretary-General, for your leadership during these most trying times.

Mr. President,

Before us is a critical, a crucial theme "*A watershed moment: transformative solutions to interlocking challenges*"

Our shared planet, our people face complex and multifaceted challenges and we must act now.

We have the responsibility, the duty to find common ground.

Together we must deliver the transformative solutions needed to build peaceful, inclusive, healthy and resilient societies. Societies looking with hope to their futures because they can live in a planet we sustain in peace and health for current and future generations to come.

Yours, ours is a timely and relevant theme to guide our work during this session.

The global challenges are vast, they are many, they are interlinked. They all are ultimately about maintaining international peace and security.

With urgency we must, among so many other issues, overcome the severe economic, financial and social impacts of the COVID-19 Global Pandemic, accelerate action on climate change, ocean health, energy transformation, the sustainable use of natural resources, cybersecurity and I could go on.

For this, we must unite and we must be determined to work together for solutions. The very peaceful existence of humanity and that of the planet hosting us are at stake.

We must unite to find the way forward in an equitable multi-lateral system and a cooperation fit for purpose, fit for the future and respectful of our differences but united by our shared desire for an inclusive, hopeful and sustainable future for all.

Mr. President

Earlier this year, Tonga co-sponsored several UN General Assembly Resolutions in support of the people of Ukraine.

We continue to urge a peaceful resolution of the conflict to save unnecessary loss of lives and minimise any further devastations.

Tonga is far away from this conflict.

Yet, its ripple effects are felt by all of us.

Tonga, like so many others, are faced with higher costs of fuel, food, and basic supplies. Inflation is double-digit. These are inflation rates that we have not experienced in decades.

Mr. President,

More than ever, it is urgent that we progress toward implementing the goals of Agenda 2030 set seven years ago.

At half-time, the reality is that the existential threats from climate change, pandemics, and conflict have increased. This is not some temporary inconvenience.

Let us admit that situations have worsened since we last met.

This is also why we thank the Secretary-General for his Sustainable Development Goals Report 2022.

I believe this provides a “roadmap out of crises”.

The promises of the Global Agenda we agreed to risks to be a promise we did not keep.

We must keep our promises especially to the vulnerable populations such as those of small island developing states.

We must focus.

There are areas which need immediate action to rescue the SDGs and deliver meaningful progress for people and the planet by 2030.

Mr. President,

The successor agreement to the SAMOA Pathway will be critical and notably in regard of the support by the international community for SIDS.

SIDS are and must remain a special case for development.

We are not a footnote, we face unique vulnerabilities.

Once again, it is with urgency that we call on all states to show solidarity with the peoples of the SIDS.

We call on your support especially so during the preparatory process for the SAMOA successor arrangement. Only a few short years remain to implement the SAMOA Pathway.

Mr President,

Tonga welcomes the UN Secretariat work on a monitoring framework for the SAMOA pathway implementation.

Already three decades have elapsed since small island developing states called for an index recognizing our special circumstances and vulnerabilities.

The international financial system has used measures not necessarily adapted to our special circumstances, our challenges, and our ecological and economic vulnerabilities.

This has limited our access to appropriate financing, debt relief, and aid.

Greater responsiveness to our special circumstances has come about over time by taking into account the unique factors affecting the entire range of our political, social, economic and environmental development issues.

We express appreciation to the Prime Minister of Antigua & Barbuda and the UN High Level Panel for the release of the Interim Report on the Development of a Multidimensional Vulnerability Index. We look forward to its finalisation and its adoption by December 2022.

Mr. President,

Tonga, like so many of our Pacific neighbours, faces natural disasters of unprecedented severity and frequency.

This threatens our very existence and certainly our efforts for an inclusive and sustainable development of a small economy like Tonga.

All Tongans will forever recall the 15th of January 2022.

The Hunga-Tonga-Hunga Ha'apai volcano erupted.

The explosion was of an intensity so great that some research compares it to the impact of a nuclear explosion.

We made the news of the world. Not the news we looked for.

Research documents that the explosion may have created a tsunami almost as high as the Statue of Liberty.

Plumes of hot gas, ash, and water vapour were projected into the atmosphere, reaching a height of 36 miles.

The ensuing tsunami devastated our economy.

Several islands were completely or severely destroyed. People were displaced and then evacuated to neighbouring islands.

The volcanic eruption and tsunami cut access to basics for people and cut a precious lifeline for an island nation, our communications.

The widespread economic and social damage and sadly loss of lives, is estimated by the World Bank at 36.4% of Tonga's GDP.

In our hour of need, we recognize with our deepest appreciation the response from Member States and their peoples.

We recognize the support of the philanthropic institutions, the United Nations System and other Intergovernmental Organizations, Development Partners, the private sector, Non-Government Organizations, and Individuals.

Thank you, Malo Aupito, for standing in solidarity with Tonga at our hour of difficulty.

My government has renewed our national priorities. We must build back better and build national resilience to external threats and risks; improve the quality of services and affordability to the community, and achieve progressive and sustainable economic growth.

We are committed to reduce the risks and the harmful effects of natural disasters, particularly through risk informed development efforts, through enhancing disaster preparedness for effective response.

Mr. President,

Then, in February of this year, after two years of keeping COVID-19 at bay through the closure of our border, Tonga experienced its first community outbreak.

Over the previous two years we vaccinated our people.

I must thank Tonga's development partners for providing support, both directly and through the COVAX Facility.

We also acknowledge the support provided by UNICEF and the WHO on infection, prevention, control, risk communication, and surveillance.

This support was critical to Tonga's preparedness and response plan.

It enabled a nationwide vaccination program for those aged 12 years and older.

Finally, on 1st August this year we could again open our borders. We do so, emphasizing preventative health measures to mitigate risks and ensure a safe reopening.

Mr. President,

Tonga has one of the world's highest rates of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) globally. NCDs, such as cardiovascular disease, cancers, diabetes, and chronic respiratory diseases, account for approximately 80% of deaths in Tonga.

We must provide continuous support to meet our current goal, in line with the SDG Goal of reducing NCD-related deaths by one-third by the year 2030.

Mr. President,

Climate Change continues to be the single greatest existential threat facing the Blue Pacific.

The adverse impacts of climate change make Tonga the third most vulnerable country in the world.

This threatens our territorial integrity, land, water, health, infrastructure, food security, biological diversity, livelihoods, and ecosystems.

It threatens peoples' mental health and our sense of nationhood.

Climate change is an existential threat to people and our desire for international peace and security.

We reiterate our call for this issue to be a permanent item on the Security Council's agenda.

The Security Council must be seized of the matter because of its clear links to traditional threats to international peace and security.

Whether it is sea-level rise, loss of territory, and the mass migration it leads to, this is a trigger for violence and a threat to peace and security.

Mr. President,

Tonga is a large ocean state.

99% of our sovereign territory is the ocean and through generations we have shown a serious responsibility to protect the ocean.

The ocean is our beating heart, it serves as the foundation for our economy and the lifeline for sectors from tourism to fisheries to ocean transport and international shipping.

The conservation and sustainable use of the ocean and its resources is at the forefront of our concerns and interests.

Tonga joins member states that argued for the importance of the ocean and seas to global sustainable development.

Tonga aspires to play its role in the fight against illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing activities, particularly in responding to mitigating IUU risks.

We must achieve the goals outlined in SDG14 if we are to survive. Anything less is unacceptable, and we must do whatever we can within our available resources. We were pleased to participate at the 7th Our Ocean Conference in Koror, Palau and the 2nd United Nations Ocean Conference (UNOC) held in Lisbon, Portugal and we look forward to continuing such conferences to ensure that ocean and seas are a priority in the Global sustainable development agenda. It is through such engagement that partnerships were formed and resulted in Tonga producing its first ever Tonga Ocean Management Plan 2021.

Mr. President

Tonga continues to recognize the importance of the legal mandate provided by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.

As a member of the International Seabed Authority, Tonga continuously engages in the work of the Authority. We must expeditiously conclude those Exploitation Regulations which ensure that appropriate conservation and environmental management practices are in place when exploitation activities begin.

Mr. President,

The conservation and protection of our high seas remain a priority for Tonga.

I refer in particular to the negotiations to conclude an international legally binding instrument under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea on the conservation and sustainable use of marine biological diversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction.

Tonga is optimistic that the considerable amount of work that has gone into this process, along with further progress on resolving key issues of divergence, will enable us to come to a positive conclusion.

Let us conclude this historical instrument to support our obligations under UNCLOS.

Mr. President,

Tonga has a large proportion of our people living in diasporas near and far with two out of three Tongans living overseas.

Remittances equal some 40% of GDP.

This is why it is of concern to us to find ways to reduce the cost of remittances.

Mr. President,

I am honoured to be appointed as President of the sixth session of the Assembly of SIDS DOCK.

In this capacity, I launched the Global Ocean Energy Alliance (or GLOEA), on 29th June 2022 in Lisbon, Portugal.

The GLOEA is an initiative focused on accelerating the development of ocean energy technologies and projects through partnerships that mobilize technical, human, and financial resources and aim to establish a global community of shared interest. A community capable of developing a pipeline of bankable ocean energy projects to serve islands, cities, and coastal nations.

As the 2022 events so cruelly showed us, internet connectivity is a lifeline for Tonga.

Our economy and our society are dependent on well functioning domestic and international communications.

The security required to protect such connectivity is therefore vital for our sustainable development. In this regard, I wish to recognize the work of the ITU and UNESCO'S Broadband Commission for sustainable development.

Mr. President,

Education is at the core of peace and sustainable futures.

Tonga recognizes and welcomes the opportunity to share in the Transforming Education Summit held earlier this week.

The summit provided an opportunity to once again reiterate our collective call to put education front and center for our inclusive and sustainable development for ALL.

We must build future-proof, sustainable, and resilient education systems. For this, we must scale up financial investment.

Mr. President,

Pacific Islands Forum Leaders have committed to strong regional action for a shared stewardship of the Pacific Ocean.

The Pacific Ocean covers one-third of our planet's surface and it is our desire to act as one Blue Pacific Continent.

We continue to note with grave concern the threat posed by sea-level rise to our Blue Pacific. We commit ourselves to ensure that climate change-induced sea-level rise must not challenge our maritime zones delineated under UNCLOS as reflected in the *"2021 Declaration on Preserving Maritime Zones in the face of Climate Change-related Sea-level rise"*.

We note the invaluable work of the International Law Commission, in particular, the Study Group on Sea-Level Rise for its work in advancing deliberations on this topic with the view to strengthening the UNCLOS framework, particularly in addressing the modern realities of sea-level rise.

We further note the high **Debt Sustainability Analysis of Forum Island Countries** and emphasise the need for debt instruments to be simple, manageable and implementable given countries' limited resources, the time-bound nature of debt instruments and the increasingly constrained development finance landscape worldwide.

We also committed to revitalising the **Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration** in 2023.

Mr. President,

Our Pacific collective will and remains our strength in our advocacy for faster and more action by the international community.

Vanuatu's initiative to seek an Advisory Opinion from the ICJ on the obligations of states under international law to protect the rights of present and future generations against the adverse impacts of climate change, to

clarify the legal consequences of climate change. Tonga joined all of the other Pacific Leaders in supporting this initiative, and a step in the right direction.

The initiative by Tuvalu and Antigua & Barbuda to establish a Commission of SIDs on climate change and international law that will be tasked with developing and implementing fair and just global environmental norms and practices is also a step in the right direction.

Mr. President,

I conclude by reiterating Tonga's support for your important work.

May we show resolve, courage and partnership to meet the challenges before us and turn the needle to hope for present and future generations.

May God guide and bless this august General Assembly and all its members, observers, and staff in our shared journey during this session to the destination of finding solutions through solidarity, sustainability, and science.

I thank you.