



**Remarks by His Excellency Surangel S. Whipps Jr.
President of the Republic of Palau**

**General Debate of the 78th Session of the United Nations General Assembly
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President Dennis Francis, Secretary General Antonio Guterres, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, Alii and Warm greetings from the people of Palau.

President Francis, congratulations on your election. As a fellow islander, you are well acquainted with the challenges common to all SIDS — from economic resilience and climate change, to financing and security. We look forward to working with you over the next year.

Secretary-General Guterres, we thank you again for your tireless efforts and advocacy for a more secure, prosperous, and sustainable world, which is our ultimate goal and what brings us together today.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is a universal call to action. As a Small Island Developing State, Palau faces economic challenges related to our small population. We are vulnerable to climate change. We struggle with the high cost of imported foods and goods. And face infrastructure challenges due to our remote location.

These shared issues highlight the unique challenges faced by SIDS in our pursuit of sustainable development and a better life for our people.

Mr. President,

Like other SIDS, Palau is working to build a diverse and resilient economy. We are looking to the digital world, which doesn't rely on land mass but on our determination to succeed.

This new perspective is borne out of a hard lesson learned when the punches started coming about seven years ago. In 2016, Palau's economy, heavily reliant on tourism, had a significant downturn. Our tourism numbers fell 13% to 146,650 in one year. By 2019, the numbers dropped further by

47%. Then COVID-19 hit. In 2021, Palau recorded a mere 3,400 visitors, a staggering 98% decrease from the 2015 numbers.

Mr. President, Colleagues,

I share these figures to underscore our susceptibility to external influences and the profound impact they have on our national economy. Already suffering from the drop in tourism, Palau was hit hard by the worldwide delay of goods caused by the pandemic. Factories shut down. And logistical challenges led to delays in the delivery of equipment and supplies. Prices soared. Russia's invasion of Ukraine further aggravated the situation, causing gas prices to skyrocket.

The economic downturn experienced by Palau underscores the interconnectedness of our global community. If tourism challenges and COVID-19 were the 1, 2 punch, the inflated cost of goods could have very well knocked us out. Luckily for us, we had the help and support of partners.

The invasion of Ukraine by Russia, although geographically distant, had a ripple effect that led to inflation of prices in Palau. This situation raises the importance of security and how destabilizing conflict can be to world order.

There are Palauans today who survived a war that was not of their own making — only to suffer from the ripple effects of another. Current events serve as a stark reminder of the urgent need for peace and stability worldwide. We unequivocally condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine and call for an immediate cessation of hostilities.

Similarly, we urge the United Nations and all parties involved in the Taiwan Straits to exercise restraint and seek a peaceful resolution to reduce tensions. The well-being and prosperity of nations and their economies are intrinsically linked to global peace and stability.

For the last 2 years, we have been striving to build a resilient economy amidst external pressures. A significant challenge has been the outmigration. Since 1994, nearly half of Palau's population has left. This brain drain has not only reduced local capacity but also hindered growth. We are grateful for our partner nations, including the U.S., Japan, Taiwan, Australia, and others. They provide assistance and training to assist with capacity and upskill the local population as well. We are also encouraged by discussions to promote economic investments that can potentially create job opportunities that can help discourage outmigration and promote economic growth.

Climate change is the most significant challenge to our progress towards achieving Sustainable Development. The impacts are evident in our coastal areas, agricultural lands, marine resources, cultural heritage, and livelihoods. Assistance in mitigating and adapting to these impacts is crucial for our continued progress and survival.

In my youth, I'd spearfish on the reef with my father, helping to provide for our family. There was one remote island in Palau's southern waters where we would go. It was alive with birds, turtles, fish, and clams. Recently, I revisited this island with my children, witnessing turtles laying eggs.

The island had diminished by two-thirds due to sea-level rise. Sadly, half of the turtle eggs laid were in the tidal zone, unlikely to survive. This heart-wrenching reality mirrors the fate of our homes and cultures if we fail to take decisive action.

We urgently call on the G20 nations, responsible for 80% of global carbon emissions, to uphold their commitments to the Paris Agreement and limit warming to 1.5 degrees. This is crucial to mitigate climate change impacts like disappearing islands and unhatched turtle eggs. As major emitters, G20 nations have a crucial role to play in emission reduction and leading the path towards sustainable development.

We also urge the UN to simplify access to multilateral funds for SIDS and other vulnerable communities, promoting a faster transition. We call on the international community to work with SIDS to increase access to climate finance.

However, we must ensure that commitments pledged here are acted upon and not forgotten. “Ng ko er a teribsel daob.” Let’s not be like the foam riding on the waves of the ocean, drifting without settling. This Palauan saying refers to meetings where much is said but afterwards there is no action.

Despite these challenges, we acknowledge the progress that has been made. COP26 in Glasgow and COP27 in Sharm-al-Sheik were successful, leading to green domestic policies in some of the world’s largest economies.

We appreciate those opposing Deep-Sea Mining, which has been delayed, allowing for further studies. Proponents argue seabed minerals aid renewable transition, but we lack knowledge about potential impacts on underwater ecosystems. Disturbing the ocean bed could release stored carbon dioxide, contradicting climate change efforts. We advocate for a global deep-sea mining moratorium, adhering to the UN Convention on The Law Of The Sea’s precautionary principle.

On a positive note, Palau will sign the BBNJ Instrument tomorrow. Universal participation is crucial, especially from developed countries that can provide implementation means and engage in Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction activities. This moment signifies global unity in protecting high seas biodiversity.

Palau seconds U.S. President Joseph Biden’s call for Security Council reform. We believe such reform would introduce fresh perspectives and allow nations like Japan a permanent seat in the Council, which has seen little change since its establishment in 1945. We also propose considering the abolishment of veto powers, which can obstruct effective UN action.

The upcoming Summit of the Future in 2024 and the 80th Anniversary of the United Nations in 2025 present fitting opportunities to demonstrate progress in the Security Council.

We also advocate for change regarding the Republic of China (Taiwan), unjustly excluded from UN processes, despite its remarkable leadership and innovative solutions. Taiwan has collaborated with Palau on vital issues such as tourism, agriculture, ocean conservation, climate, gender equality, education, and innovation.

We urge the UN to allow Taiwan's meaningful participation in crucial specialized agencies and processes like WHO, ICAO, and UNFCCC. Taiwan's 23 million people have much to offer the world. The UN Charter affirms the equal rights of all peoples and nations – we urge the UN to uphold this vision by allowing Taiwan to participate and contribute.

Our world is under siege from war and climate change, threats that undermine sustainable development and drive poverty. The Ukraine crisis exemplifies this, with lives lost, property destroyed, and essential supplies disrupted. These crises are not distant threats but harsh realities affecting millions, including those in the Pacific islands.

We must act now to improve life across our shared ocean and world. The Palauan story of Tebang teaches us the power of unity. Tebang, unable to move a log alone, succeeded with his friends by chanting “Ikamuu!” or “It can move!” This tale underscores the importance of unity in overcoming monumental challenges.

Just as Tebang and his friends moved the log, we too can move mountains if we act together. Our task may be daunting, but remember: “Ikamuu!” We can move towards a sustainable future where our grandchildren breathe clean air, live in peace, and prosper.

So, let's raise our voices together and chant our own “Ikamuu!” Let's move this world towards a better tomorrow. Together, we are unstoppable. Together, we can ensure a thriving planet for generations to come. Let's seize this moment with unity and determination. Let's unite for a better tomorrow - because together, we can move!

MESULANG, THANK YOU. GOD BLESS PALAU, GOD BLESS US ALL.