

UNITED NATIONS



NATIONS UNIES

Message on Behalf of  
THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

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MESSAGE TO CONFERENCE ON THREATENED ISLAND NATIONS:  
LEGAL IMPLICATIONS OF RISING SEAS AND A CHANGING CLIMATE  
New York, 24 May 2011

President (Jurelang) Zedkaia  
Minister (John) Silk  
Ambassador (Phillip) Muller  
Ambassador (Dessima) Williams  
Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen

I am very pleased to be here at this important conference on behalf of the Secretary-General. I know he very much wanted to be with you tonight, but unfortunately, as he already told President Zedkaia when he met him last week, his travel schedule did not permit it. He sends his warm greetings and best wishes to you, and has asked me to share with you a few ideas on his behalf.

Long before climate change was on the international agenda, the Marshall Islands and other members of the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) were already sounding the clarion call to action.

Climate change is the defining challenge of our time. Nowhere is that challenge more urgent – and nowhere are the consequences more profound – than with the small island states. Your call to limit global temperature rise to 1.5 degree Celsius is far from an academic matter. For your countries, it could well be a matter of survival.

Sea level rise induced by climate change is a threat to the lives, livelihoods, food security and territorial integrity of your countries. In the span of decades, your nations may become uninhabitable. Such a scenario would be an unmitigated catastrophe for your citizens. It would also pose unprecedented security, legal, economic, and indeed moral questions, not only for your country, but for the international community as a whole.

That is why this conference is of such critical significance. What you are discussing here is the meaning of statehood and sovereignty in what many scientists now call “the Anthropocene” – a new geological epoch in which our human species is the leading driver of change on the planet.

The questions you are raising are profound. If a country loses its territorial integrity, does it lose its statehood, including membership in the United Nations and other intergovernmental bodies? What legal status do its citizens possess if they are forced to permanently resettle elsewhere as a result of climate-induced migration? What legal rights do resettled citizens have in their ‘host’ communities? Do citizens still retain access to the resources contained in their maritime territorial waters if the land mass of their country no longer exists?

And what of compensation for damages and loss?

The bitter truth is that global climate change will extract the heaviest toll from those countries – including the Marshall Islands and other small island states -- that have done least to contribute to it.

The economic implications of climate change are extremely grave. Globally, small island states have among the highest ratio of economic losses from disasters and other climate impacts.

A major disaster can wipe out decades of development gains and cause immense losses overnight. That is why we need to focus much more attention on reducing disaster risks and strengthening long-term resilience as a core element in climate adaptation.

It is vitally important for the threatened island nations, for the members of AOSIS, to continue to raise your voices on climate change. Your communities are on the front lines of this global threat. You know first-hand the destructive potential of rising sea levels, more intensive storms, increasing ocean acidification, and other hazards.

The United Nations share your concerns. The United Nations will continue to speak up for the poorest and most vulnerable members of the human family. And it stands ready to assist governments in efforts to reduce climate risks and adapt to climate impacts.

The small island states played a prominent role in the negotiations that led to the adoption of the landmark General Assembly draft resolution on the security implications of climate change in 2009.<sup>1</sup> In July, Germany will bring the issue back to the Security Council, where it was first discussed in 2007. Climate Change can be source of insecurity, but it also multiplies existing threats to security.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2009/ga10830.doc.htm>

Some do not agree with the issue being discussed by the Security Council. Yet, is there an appropriate forum available where such interconnected sustainable development challenges can be addressed by the international community? This is perhaps an issue for Rio + 20 to consider.

To prevent further instability, we must address both the cause and consequences of climate change. Adaptation and mitigation deserve equal attention.

The UN climate change conference in Cancun delivered a much-needed shot in the arm for the multilateral negotiating process. But clearly, we still have a long way to go in meeting the scientific bottom line for effective action on climate change.

We must continue to press for deeper emission cuts. And we need resources for adaptation and capacity-building efforts, which are a priority for many small island nations.

The task now is two-fold. First, governments need to implement fully all the agreements they made at Cancun, including on climate finance, protecting forests, adaptation, and technology. And looking toward the Durban conference, they need to come to a resolution on the future of the Kyoto Protocol and on ways to engage all countries in an emerging global framework.

Second, governments need to ramp up national efforts on the ground to curb emissions and strengthen climate resilience.

Climate change is, of course, important, but simultaneously we have to deal with a number of other interconnected challenges such as poverty, energy, food and water security, unemployment and environmental degradation.

Last year the Secretary-General established a Global Sustainability Panel to present him with practical recommendations on how to address the linkages between these issues. The Panel's work seeks to eradicate poverty, reduce inequalities and foster more inclusive growth while respecting the climate and natural ecosystems upon which we depend for our survival. The Panel will continue to engage with Member States, the private sector, and civil society before delivering its final report in January next year. The Secretary-General expects to use the report as an important input to the Rio+20 process.

As we travel the road toward more sustainable development, we must be sure that the safety and well-being of people remain top-most in our minds at all times. Here I wish to say a word about the quest for low-carbon energy sources, specifically, nuclear power.

Many nations rely on nuclear energy as part of their overall energy mix. It will remain an important energy source for the foreseeable future, particularly as the climate challenge continues to vex us.

As climate change accelerates, it will bring greater extremes of weather. We must put a sharper focus on the new nexus between natural disasters and nuclear safety, and give greater weight to disaster preparedness in rich and poor nations alike, and do this in the context of overall energy needs and alternative supply options.

In the aftermath of the disaster at the nuclear plant in Japan, the Secretary-General has formally launched a UN system-wide study on the implications of the Fukushima accident, including a top to bottom review of current nuclear safety standards, both at the national and international levels.

The people of the Marshall Islands have suffered first-hand from the effects of nuclear fall-out and massive contamination. In the aftermath of WWII and throughout the Cold War, nuclear annihilation posed an existential threat to humanity. Today some small island developing states face an existential threat, this time, from the impacts of climate change.

The implications of this threat are many, and include some of the serious legal issues you are discussing here today. On behalf of the Secretary-General, please accept my best wishes for a productive conference and for the success of our shared efforts to meet the full scope and scale of the climate challenge.

Janos Pasztor  
Executive Secretary  
High-level Panel on Global Sustainability (GSP)