

بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِیْمِ



Keynote Address
by
His Excellency Mr. Maumoon Abdul Gayoom,
President of the Republic of Maldives,
at the Inauguration Ceremony of
“The Human Dimension of Global Climate Change”
Dharubaaruge, Male’
Tuesday, 13 November 2007

Honourable Ministers, Distinguished Delegates, Friends:

May I, first of all, join Minister Abdulla Shahid in welcoming you to the Maldives and in wishing you a pleasant and fruitful stay with us. I wish to thank all of you, on behalf of the Government and people of the Maldives, for accepting our invitation. I would also like to thank the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), the Centre for International Environmental Law, The Diplo Foundation and The Oak Foundation, without whose support and assistance this conference could not have been organized.

We are gathered here today to share our ideas and experiences, and to pool our diverse resources, in the fight against global climate change. We are together in the fight against climate change. The

international community has failed to find pragmatic, effective and speedy solutions to a problem that has fast become the toughest in the contemporary world. There is no doubt that climate change is the defining issue of our time. What we need to do is to put people back at the heart of climate change diplomacy. All it takes is for us to develop a common platform as we approach the important Bali conference of next month.

We can take heart from the fact that the SIDs and the LDCs have always played a pivotal role in international negotiations on climate change. The Framework Convention of 1992 and the subsequent Kyoto accord had been welcome developments. On the back of these achievements, we had greeted the new millennium with high hopes of ensuring safety for our people from the impending disaster.

However, the anticipated real cuts in greenhouse gases emissions never materialized. Instead, we were presented with a number of alternatives, such as transferring technology, creating carbon sinks and trading in emissions. While such initiatives are no doubt important, they cannot be a substitute for the need to drastically cut down on greenhouse gas emissions. We must now reassess our options, realign our priorities and redouble our efforts.

Excellencies and Friends:

To us in the Maldives, as, I am sure, to many of you, environmental security is today an issue of life and death. The 2004 tsunami took many innocent lives, and caused serious setbacks to our economic prosperity. Three years on, we in the Maldives have made considerable progress on the road to recovery. Key sectors such as tourism and fisheries are today registering pre-tsunami profitability.

However, we were yet again reminded of our environmental vulnerability earlier this year, when tidal surges flooded nearly 80 of our islands simultaneously. We are under no illusion that time is running out for us to ensure the survival of our future generations. It is our responsibility to ensure that they are not deprived of the opportunity to grow up and to live in a safe and protected environment.

There is no doubt that every human being should be able to enjoy the right to a safe and secure environment. Yet, for reasons beyond our comprehension, none of the existing international treaties, declarations, conventions and agreements addresses this issue adequately.

Excellencies and friends:

The Stockholm Declaration adopted at the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment stated that “Both aspects of man’s environment, the natural and the man-made, are essential to his well-being and to the enjoyment of basic human rights – even the right to life itself”. And the Aarhus Convention of 1998 stated that “every person has the right to live in an environment adequate to his or her health and well-being”. Also, the UN General Assembly resolution 45/94 said that “all individuals are entitled to live in an environment adequate for their health and well-being”.

Similarly, global human rights treaties such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the ILO Convention No. 169 concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries give references

to some aspects of environmental protection in respect to an individual's right to health, land and resources.

I also note that the UN Commission on Human Rights had decided in 2001 to invite the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) to consider organizing a joint expert seminar "to review and assess progress achieved since the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in promoting and protecting human rights in relation to environmental questions and in the framework of Agenda 21".

However, in spite of these documented international references to a safe environment as a fundamental human right, this fact has yet to be universally recognized through international legislation and institutions.

I firmly believe that the time has come for the international community to grant universal recognition to the fact that environmental protection, preservation and security are part of an individual's basic human rights. Therefore, I take this opportunity to call for a comprehensive international treaty to guarantee this fundamental human right to millions of people across the world. The Maldives is also calling for a debate on the link between climate change and human rights at the Human Rights Council.

Excellencies and Friends:

For our calls to be heard and our proposals to be taken seriously, we the Small Island Developing States must consolidate our ranks. We must strengthen co-operation between ourselves and with other influential actors on the global stage.

Last week, I attended the second edition of European Development Days in Lisbon. The forum was designed to forge new alliances between the EU and its developing country partners, especially the SIDS and the LDCs. The theme chosen for this year was the relationship between climate change and development.

I have fond recollections of the historic Small States' Conference on Sea Level Rise, held in Male' in 1989. The outcome of the Conference was the Male' Declaration, which catalysed the establishment of the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS).

The birth of AOSIS marked a new era in international diplomacy for SIDS. It was largely through the coordinated efforts of AOSIS that the world came to realise the vulnerability of small states to sea-level rise and storm surges. It was AOSIS that mobilised the efforts that followed to seek environmental security. Other achievements include the recognition by the UN of the special development conditions faced by small states, and the decision to hold the UN Global Conference on Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States of 1992 and the Barbados Conference of 1994. The tireless work of AOSIS over two decades has meant that, today, the Alliance is rightfully known as the "conscience of the Convention".

Excellencies and Friends:

This year we mark the 10th anniversary of the Kyoto Protocol. The negotiations that had led to the Kyoto accord were among the finest moments in the life of AOSIS. Our active participation and campaigning for a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions was amply rewarded. We were the first group of countries to become signatories of the Protocol. Many of us were also among the first to ratify it.

In the light of this, I believe that AOSIS should strengthen its voice in the current climate change debate, and work out a unified position on all issues relating to climate change. We know from our past experience that whenever we chose to work in partnership, the results were extremely positive.

There is little doubt that the global fight against climate change is today at a critical juncture. With the end of the Kyoto years drawing ever closer, there is an urgent need to tackle the issue with added impetus and resolve. We must assume a leadership role in this debate. It is for us a matter of survival.

I view the Bali conference of next month as a great opportunity for AOSIS to reassume its rightful role as leader rather than follower. It may also be our last chance to set the ball rolling towards a comprehensive post-Kyoto climate change accord.

Excellencies and Friends:

In the 10 years since the Kyoto Protocol came into being, the issue of climate change and sea-level rise has grown in prominence in the

global arena. There is near universal agreement now that climate change is a clear and present danger.

The fact that this year's Nobel Peace Prize was awarded for excellence in climate diplomacy and research is ample proof of that. This means that, in comparison to the pre-Kyoto era, AOSIS will now find more friends and allies at international negotiations. We must be wise in our choices and bold in our initiatives. I have the utmost confidence that, through our joint efforts, we can inject the necessary vigour into the climate negotiation process to realize our dream of a comprehensive agreement for the years ahead.

The future we seek to build is not a zero-sum game where one lifestyle is sacrificed to save another.

The future we seek is one where clean energy powers sustainable development, creating new and better jobs and raising living standards across the world.

The future we seek is one where biodiversity contributes to the wonders of our lives, and the proper management of natural resources provides sustained economic benefit.

It is a future where scientific and technological innovation increases our mobility and builds our collective capacity.

And it is a future where the promise of globalization, to share prosperity across all corners of the globe, is delivered to all humanity.

Thank you and good luck!