

H.E. Mr. Christopher J. Loeak
President of the Republic of the Marshall Islands
3rd UN Conference on Small Island Developing States
Apia, Samoa
1 September 2014

Mr. Secretary-General, the President of the Conference, the President of the General Assembly, Excellencies, Co-Chairs, Distinguished Representatives, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my sincere honor to bring you the warm greetings of Iakwe from the people and Government of the Republic of the Marshall Islands.

I wish to convey the sincere gratitude of my people and fa'afetai to the Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi and the host nation of the Independent State of Samoa, to His Excellency Ban Ki Moon, Secretary-General of the United Nations, and to all of the participants who have joined us this week in Samoa, and in the Pacific.

This meeting marks a key milestone for small island nations – we are rising, in our own right, as vocal and influential actors on the global stage, and we are ready to take control of our destiny. We are no longer the passive recipients of the world's assistance, but rather the drivers of our own sustainable development, reflecting the true aspirations of our people.

Excellencies,

Although we have already achieved some notable successes, our small governments and challenges of capacity often put international assistance out of reach. Our international partnerships need to be better tailored to reflect these realities. “One size fits all” approaches, sometimes as a result of categorizations that fail to evaluate, reveal and properly take into account our unique characteristics and true economic vulnerabilities, are often counterproductive. As a starting point, we need to improve, at every step in the pipeline – the management, capacity, access and effectiveness of the partnerships and assistance already on offer. I hope – and expect – that the follow-up efforts in this conference will provide me, my fellow Leaders and our small island communities with the performance “report card” we need and seek.

Excellencies,

It is well within our reach to turn these opportunities into gains for our people by kick starting our own economies, and building self-sufficiency, primarily by ensuring the true sustainability of our oceans and precious marine resources. This was the strong message in our recent Pacific Islands Forum Declaration in Palau.

The Pacific is home to over half of the world's commercial tuna – a major global food stock, and a five billion dollar annual global industry – in which we reel in only a tiny fraction of the economic benefit – only a penny on the dollar. The other 99 cents go to foreign fishing nations – many of whom are our major development partners in the Pacific. The Marshall Islands is among the most aid-dependent nations in the world, and our private sector is in its infancy. It could be a giant. This is our primary economic opportunity, and we must exploit it.

We are pursuing this progress on our own terms – putting forward our own development aspirations,

and leading with some of the strongest conservation measures in the world to ensure sustainability of our stocks into the future. A core element – and one where we will never yield – is the closure of certain areas, in particular the high seas, to fishing as a condition to access our national waters. We in the Pacific – the Parties to the Nauru Agreement and all Forum Fishery members – are leading, we are already building new partnerships with the private sector and those nations seeking to join us in changing the world's sustainable fisheries.

Our tuna purse seine fishery is the largest in the world to receive sustainable certification from the Marine Stewardship Council – the gold standard around the world. Supermarket product managers from the European Union, Australia, South Africa, Norway and Australia have urged, with little result, for the commercial industry to follow our Pacific PNA sustainable certification. There is perhaps no better textbook example of true sustainable development, and one in need of targeted partnership to boost our own private sector readiness.

But political will – and unresolved trade or treaty negotiations – have jeopardized our aspirations. Here is a partnership “at scale” waiting to happen – one that will build our own Pacific economies and boost global food security – and a partnership where we need not so much your donations – but rather your cooperation and your political resolve.

Excellencies,

All this talk of partnerships – and all we can achieve here in Samoa – will be moot if we don't address the greatest threat to the very future of all of our island homelands: climate change.

Already our atoll islands are under threat, and our fresh water is becoming saltier. The king tides are higher, and the droughts more frequent. While we are doing what we can by boosting our resilience through strong adaptation efforts – including through the Micronesia Challenge – for a country like my own, barely two meters above sea level, this is quickly becoming a full blown climate change emergency.

We are not just talking about impacts to our economies and to our societies; we are talking about a world where many of our countries could literally cease to exist. While history has always been a story of territorial conquests and the redrawing of lines on a map, the potential loss of entire countries due to the pollution of others is completely without precedent. We cannot allow this to happen.

In just three weeks' time, world leaders will come together for the UN Secretary-General's Climate Summit in New York. The Secretary-General's Summit comes not a moment too soon. It is the first gathering of world leaders on climate change in nearly five years, and just over a year before our deadline to sign a new global treaty on climate change in Paris at the end of 2015. As the Secretary-General has said himself: Samoa must start the drumroll for New York, and as island leaders we have a unique role to play there and on the road to Paris.

We may be small, but leadership comes naturally to us. Last September, the Pacific region demonstrated this with our Majuro Declaration for Climate Leadership which captured in one place some of the world's most ambitious emissions reduction and renewable energy targets. And next March, when some of the world's largest economies announce their new energy and emission plans for 2020 and beyond, we will be prepared to show the same courage and conviction in coming forward with our plans to help create a race to the top.

Put simply, the time for finger pointing is long-past, and that old game holds no real interest for me, nor for so many of my fellow Leaders gathered here this week. Instead, we must recognize that there is no more powerful form of leadership than leadership by example. In the face of the biggest challenge of our generation, we must be the leaders that we were all elected to be. It is time for us to form the greatest climate change alliance the world has ever seen. And this alliance must have its genesis here in Samoa.

Excellencies,

The issues I have outlined above – oceans, fisheries and climate change – are those where, as small islands, we have the most visible moral or economic voice. But make no mistake, we are working through these difficult development challenges one by one, and in an integrated fashion.

But we face challenges in other areas as well. Non-communicable diseases are a dangerous threat to the world's island nations, and rates of diabetes have now reached crisis levels in the Pacific. We are in the middle of a “perfect storm” of low uptake of preventative health care and modern diets that have unfortunately forsaken our traditional, healthy food sources. Urgent and targeted partnerships now can help to curb this dangerous trend. We have not a moment to waste.

And we must also invest heavily in our future. Our national education system is undergoing significant reform to boost access, results and effectiveness in ensuring that our talented young generations graduate with real and targeted skills to put us on a successful and sustainable path to prosperity.

Excellencies,

I thank you for your genuine engagement here in Apia – if the paper paragraphs of outcomes from New York seem at times incomplete, it is only here, in Samoa and in the Pacific, and “on island”, that you can best realize our voices, our vision and our aspirations.

Thank you – and koomol tata.