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THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

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“TURNING THE TIDE”

OPENING REMARKS TO THE OCEAN CONFERENCE

New York, 5 June 2017

Your Excellency Mr. Frank Bainimarama [*Prime Minister of Fiji*]

Your Excellency Ms. Isabella Lövin [*Minister for International Development Cooperation and Climate, Deputy Prime Minister of Sweden*]

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen

My thanks to the Governments of Fiji and Sweden for co-hosting this Conference, and to everyone involved in its preparation.

We are here today to take decisive action to nurture and protect the lifeblood of our planet.

Oceans and seas cover two-thirds of our home. Maybe we should change its name from “Planet Earth” to “Planet Water.”

Oceans provide food, energy, water, jobs and economic benefits for people in every country – even those that are landlocked. They are a crucial buffer against climate change and a massive resource for sustainable development. The health of our oceans and seas is inextricably linked with the health of our planet and all life on earth.

Many nationalities, including mine, have a special relationship with the sea.

The truth is, the sea has a special relationship with all of us.

It keeps us alive.

But that relationship is now under threat as never before.

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Pollution, overfishing and the effects of climate change are severely damaging the health of our oceans. According to one recent study, plastic could outweigh fish in our seas by 2050.

Rising sea levels threaten entire countries. Oceans are warming and becoming more acidic, causing coral bleaching and reducing biodiversity. Changing currents will have a serious impact on weather patterns; we must prepare for more frequent storms and droughts.

Fisheries in some places are collapsing. Dead zones – underwater deserts where life cannot survive because of a lack of oxygen– are growing rapidly in extent and number. Some species could be extinct within decades.

Conflicting demands from industry, fishing, shipping, mining and tourism are creating unsustainable levels of stress on coastal ecosystems.

Numerous reports, global commissions and scientific assessments have described the serious damage to our most vital life support system – but the situation is getting worse. Governments are not making full use of the tools available to them, including the Convention on the Law of the Sea, and UN Oceans.

We are here today to turn the tide.

We created these problems. With decisive, coordinated global action, we can solve them.

Sustainable Development Goal 14 must be our roadmap to clean, healthy oceans.

The essential first step is ending the artificial dichotomy between economic demands and the health of our seas.

The conservation and sustainable use of marine resources are two sides of the same coin.

Second, we need to promote strong political leadership and new partnerships, based on the existing legal framework. I commend all the signatories of the Call for Action that will be formally adopted this week.

Now we need concrete steps, from expanding marine protected areas, to the management of fisheries; from reducing pollution, to cleaning up plastic waste.

I call for a step change, from local and national initiatives to an urgent, coordinated international effort.

The ongoing work with a view to a legal framework on conservation and the sustainable use of biodiversity in areas beyond national jurisdiction is particularly important to the future of the oceans and their biodiversity.

Third, we must translate the political will of the 2030 Agenda, the Paris Agreement on climate change and the Addis Ababa Action Agenda into funding commitments.

Fourth, we must deepen our knowledge base, with better data, information and analysis. We can't improve what we don't measure.

Finally, we must share best practices and experiences. Most solutions are local, but many have broader relevance.

The United Nations has a critical role to play.

We are committed to providing integrated, coordinated support for the implementation of all the historic agreements of the past year, including SDG14. I am determined to break down barriers between UN agencies and programmes, to improve performance and accountability.

We are already building partnerships with Governments, the private sector, civil society and others, and working with international financial institutions on innovative financing to release more funds.

We are harnessing the power of big data to improve the basis for decision-making and accountability.

And UN Oceans and the entire UN system will continue to play a convening role as a forum for information-sharing, advocacy and the development of international law.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

The Portuguese writer Vergílio Ferreira once said: “Da minha língua vê-se o mar.”

“From my language, you can see the sea.”

So it is appropriate that my first major UN conference as Secretary-General concerns the ocean – a precious resource for so many countries.

The Swedes were sailing around the Baltic Sea and as far as present-day Istanbul some 1,300 years ago. Fijians were sailing canoes at record speeds and for record distances around the Pacific, well before that.

A Japanese creation myth tells of how the archipelago was formed from sea water. An Inuit creation myth is centred on Sedna, the Goddess of the Sea.

The sea belongs to all of us.

Improving the health of our oceans is a test for multilateralism, and we cannot afford to fail.

We must jointly address the problems of governance that have held us back.

I am aware that there are many obstacles to progress.

But we need a new strategic vision.

I call on all Member States to engage in the dialogue necessary to define a new model for the future governance of our oceans.

Unless we overcome the territorial and resource interests that have blocked progress for far too long, the state of our oceans will continue to deteriorate.

We must put aside short-term national gain, to prevent long-term global catastrophe.

Conserving our oceans and using them sustainably is preserving life itself.

Thank you.