



REPUBLIC OF NAURU

His Excellency President Lionel Rouwen Aingimea, M.P.
General Debate Statement
74th United Nations General Assembly, New York
Thursday, 26th September 2019

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Mr. President,
Excellencies
Distinguished Delegates

Good afternoon.

It is an honour to be here for the opening of the 74th session of the United Nations General Assembly. On behalf of the Republic of Nauru, I would like to congratulate His Excellency Mr. Tijiani Muhammad-Bane on his recent assumption of the Presidency of the General Assembly. Let me assure you, Mr. President, of my delegation's full cooperation and support as you steer our important work during this session.

I would also like to thank Her Excellency Ms. Maria Fernanda Espinosa Garcés for her exceptional work as our outgoing President.

As it is my first time appearing before this august body as the President of Nauru, allow me to recognize the Secretary-General His Excellency Antonio Guterres, and to commend him for his recent trip to the Pacific. I hope that it will be the first of several visits to our region, as the United Nations strives to become more responsive to the needs of the smallest and most vulnerable.

Mr. President,

The Secretary-General posed an incredibly important question to us in his opening address. Referring to a world of disquiet and a growing fear of the people that they are being left behind, he asked, and I quote, "Do they believe, as leaders, we will put people first?" unquote.

More than just a question, it was a poignant reminder that we gather here merely as servants of the people. His words should also serve as a challenge to all of us to build a more equitable and responsive government at home, and a more equitable and responsive multilateral system here at the United Nations.

The Secretary-General's challenge resonates strongly in Nauru, where just last month we held elections that saw over half the seats in Parliament change hands. The people of Nauru have spoken loud and clear that they are seeking change. Indeed, after an economic collapse, followed by many years of stagnation, far too many Nauruans have been left behind, and they are hungry for improvements in the quality of their lives.

It is the highest priority of my administration to restore to them what has been lost, to return what has been taken, and to deliver on the promises that have gone unfulfilled for too long. By working with our partners towards our sustainable development goals and climate goals, I am confident that my Administration can succeed where previous ones have stumbled. And important work has already begun that promises to transform our country in meaningful ways.

Mr. President,

Construction is moving forward on a major upgrade to our maritime port, which promises to deliver a much greater measure of food and energy security, as well as unlock new economic opportunities for the country. Our current arrangement requires that ships be moored at sea, with supplies ferried to shore by smaller vessels. This setup is incredibly costly, and unpredictable weather can delay shipments of basic goods for days.

Jointly funded by the Green Climate Fund, the Asian Development Bank, Australia, and the Nauru Government, the new port has the potential to become a hub of commerce for our small island and the wider Pacific. Value added services for fishing and shipping vessels will become viable in Nauru. It will become far easier for ship crews to disembark, providing local business owners with more business opportunities. The port will also open new markets to our exports and facilitate the development of new trade ventures, all of which will provide a more diversified and reliable revenue stream for our economy.

Our plan is to move forward with port construction in parallel to the development of the interior of our island. The 'Higher Ground' initiative, as it is known, represents a historic opportunity to build our resilience to climate change and sea level rise by moving housing and critical infrastructure away from our vulnerable coastal areas. An area equal to 80% of our island, 'topside' rises many meters above sea level and sits undeveloped, providing a veritable blank canvas to re-imagine sustainability on small islands. We are in the early stages of developing a master plan, which we look forward to sharing with committed partners in the near future.

The new port facility and the Higher Ground initiative, along with an aggressive push on renewable energy and efficiency, serve as the major cornerstones of a sustainable development strategy that has the potential to create good jobs, generate new revenue streams, and radically improve our fiscal situation. More importantly, these efforts will

finally create a wealth of new opportunities for our youth – something that has gone missing in Nauru for a generation.

The potential upside in Nauru is significant, but there remain some distressing barriers to fully capitalizing on this moment. Early this year Nauru presented its first Voluntary National Review (VNR) at the High-Level Political Forum. The VNR process helped highlight the key gaps and challenges in the implementation of our national strategies. Health and Education emerged as two areas that require urgent attention.

Mr. President,

You have highlighted education as a key component of your vision for this session of the General Assembly. So it is for my country. Teacher retention is a persistent challenge, and student truancy has risen to alarming levels.

Also, the lack of good job opportunities that require a diploma has led some families to question the value of a quality education.

Therefore, I will be calling for a review of the education system in Nauru to address the challenges and issues that we face, with a view to put in place, quality education system that will provide all learners, young and old, with capabilities to become economically productive, develop sustainable livelihoods and enhance individual well-being. But most importantly, the curriculum will embrace the Nauruan language, cultures, and traditions.

A healthy population is equally important to the health of a nation. Nauru suffers from some of the highest rates of non-communicable diseases in the world. Diabetes has taken the lives of far too many friends and family members. Some of this can be attributed to the astronomical price of fresh fruits and vegetables on the island, where even basic produce can cost as much as sixteen dollars per kilo. Our water supply does not meet WHO standards. And we need to upgrade and climate proof our healthcare facilities. We are losing our loved ones far too early in Nauru, and with it, their skills, their knowledge, and their expertise. We are losing our history. We will require multilateral assistance, or we risk losing our future as well.

Mr. President,

The climate crisis is another challenge to our medium-and long-term viability, which is why climate action has been fully integrated into our development strategy. We take our international obligation to reduce emissions very seriously, but as a small and vulnerable country, our overriding priority must be resilience.

Nauru already sits in a drought prone region of the Pacific, and their frequency is projected to increase in the future. Therefore, improving our water security is a key priority. We do not currently have a modern distribution system, and so we rely on trucks to deliver water to onsite storage tanks. Installing new tanks and buying additional trucks can improve the situation in the short-term, but our priority must be to install a water and sewerage reticulation system as envisioned in our Water Masterplan.

Mr. President,

Eradicating poverty and improving our way of life also revolves around the development of sustainable energy supplies. The importation of fossil fuels is a massive drain on our national coffers.

Therefore I am pleased to announce that much progress has been made in reaching our target of generating 50% of our energy from solar by 2020.

This is an incredible feat for our small island and I must attribute this success to the collaboration with our development partners who I would like to acknowledge: the United Arab Emirates, New Zealand, the European Union and the Asian Development Bank – thank you very much.

The small island countries of the Pacific including Nauru, are highly dependent on the marine resources for its sustenance and economic development. The tuna fishery is worth US\$6 billion annually and it is one of the best managed fisheries in the world. I attribute the success to our award-winning organisation - the Parties to the Nauru Agreement or PNA - and through the combined efforts of the Forum Fisheries Agency and the Pacific Community. I must also recognize the contributions of the outstanding men and women of the PNA, and the member countries who have been persistent in their efforts and bold in their vision.

As a word of concern though, this fishery is projected to disperse and disappear from the waters of the nine member countries and territories of the PNA in the not too distant future -- another victim of the climate crisis.

Sea level rise is not only about existential threat to our small and low-lying island. Climate change also threatens an economic Armageddon if the tuna fishery disappears.

Mr. President,

With regard to Small Island Developing States, we have a very useful plan for improving our efforts in the SAMOA Pathway, which highlights our special circumstances and development challenges. As SIDS, we have always called for genuine and durable partnerships. Partnerships are certainly part of the solution, but they need to be mainstreamed, tailored and SIDS friendly. Treating everyone the same does not mean that everyone is treated fairly, and this is why we continue to stress the special case of SIDS.

We applaud the efforts of the Secretary General in spearheading the reform of the United Nations Development System to be more effective and fit for purpose. The recent review of the Multi-Country Office brings special attention to small islands including in the establishment of the MCO office in the North Pacific. For our subregion this has been long overdue, and is a positive step in the right direction towards ensuring longer term in-country engagement for durable institutional capacity development. We look forward to working closely with the UN and our development partners in shaping the future we want – one that is risk resilient, one where our children have a future.

As already mentioned, Nauru is taking very ambitious domestic actions to address climate change. And while there are similar pockets of activity around the globe, the sum total leaves us far short of our Paris Agreement goals. After decades of inaction and delay, many dangerous impacts are now unavoidable, all of which are well captured in the IPCC's Special Report on 1.5 degrees. In small island developing states, many of these impacts have already been with us for quite some time.

Climate change will be the defining security challenge of the century, and requires a similarly robust multilateral response. For this reason, Nauru supports the proposal by the Pacific Small Island Developing States to appoint a UN Special Representative on Climate & Security, whose work must begin with an assessment of the UN's capacity to respond to climate disasters.

Mr. President,

It is not enough to proclaim the virtue of multilateralism without strengthening the commitment to achieving the sustainable development goals for citizens everywhere. And development is not sustainable if it is not fair and inclusive, and therefore we call on the United Nations to embrace willing and capable partners like Taiwan in its SDG endeavours.

Taiwan is ready to share the experience it has accumulated in reaching the level of success with its partner countries, including Nauru. In 2018 alone, Taiwan conducted development projects in various SDG fields. Therefore, Mr. President, it's about time that the UN lives up to the ideals it espouses.

On that note, let me thank the Government of Cuba for strengthening my country's health sector through the deployment of its very able medical brigade. However, while the brigade is saving Nauruan lives, their own people continue to unfairly suffer extreme hardships under nearly six decades of economic, commercial and financial blockade. We call on the United States in its applications of its embargo not to forget the friendly people of Cuba who are hurting under these sanctions.

Mr. President,

The work of the International Law Commission on the topic of "Sea-level rise in relation to international law" is of tremendous importance and interest for the Pacific. The issue around baselines, and rising seas are critical and we believe that it is in the interest of all States to give serious consideration to the impacts of sea-level rise on the livelihoods of their people.

Security of our Oceans is a problem which must also be tackled by all. Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated fishing is a great threat and economic loss to our small economy. These issues are enshrined in SDG 14 and we look forward to the convening of the second UN Ocean Conference in Portugal in 2020.

Mr. President,

My administration is determined to give more than it receives and committed to be a champion for the weak, the vulnerable, and the voiceless. Taking nothing from them but giving to them a better education system and better healthcare regime renewable energy resources and equipping them navigate a hopeful but unpredictable future. And while we cannot build this better future alone, we are excited to forge the strong partnerships and a strong multilateral system that we require.

I am fully aware of the challenges that we face as a Pacific small island developing state, but I also see the great opportunities that are now within our grasp. Recalling the words of the Secretary-General, and I quote, “[W]e, the leaders, must deliver for we, the peoples” unquote.

May God bless the Republic of Nauru. And may God bless the United Nations.

Thank you.