

**From the Pacific Ocean to the Alps:
bringing the Marshall Islands perspective to the Genève internationale**

*Luncheon-debate with the President of the Marshall Islands, H.E. Dr. Hilda Heine
21 June 2021*

- Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, *lakwe*.
- It is an honor to be with you today. And, I would like to express my gratitude to the Club Diplomatique for providing their prestigious platform and network.
- Today we are officially inaugurating our permanent mission here in Geneva. And I want to take this opportunity to share with you the history and experience of the Marshall Islands, our longstanding climate leadership and our plans and expectations for International Geneva.
- I think the title of this event is particularly evocative. ‘From the Pacific to the Alps’, suggests a long journey between two very distant and different places. With an 11-hour difference we are almost antipodes – the Republic of the Marshall Islands is a low-lying oceanic country, while Switzerland is often synonymous with mountains and valleys. Yet both of our pristine environments are fragile, and essential for the survival of our respective countries.
- The opening of our permanent mission is the result of a very long journey, one which brought our small Pacific nation through the meanders of nuclear cold war to the imminent threat of climate change. We have become one of the world’s leading voices for the protection of our environment. We now hope to bring this experience to Geneva, and work with all of you towards a fairer and more sustainable international system.
- Let me start by telling you a bit more about my country. The Marshall Islands are located in the Western North Pacific Ocean. Our exclusive economic zone

is one of the largest in the world, as it amounts to 2,131,000 squared Km. This is even more astonishing if you compare it to our total land area, of only 181 squared Km.

- We are one of only 5 atoll nations in the world. In total, we comprise 29 low-lying coral atolls and 5 single islands, for a total of 1,152 islands. Out of this, only 24 atolls are inhabited. Our average coastal elevation is about 2 feet above the sea, and it usually takes up to three days by boat to reach the most remote islands.
- You can image the challenges that our natural features pose in terms of communications, response to natural disasters and vulnerability to climate change.
- We are a very young country: we adopted our first Constitution in 1979, and we became independent in 1986. Before becoming a sovereign nation, we were a UN trusteeship administered by the United States.
- But despite a legacy of pain resulting from the nuclear tests during the trusteeship period, we have strong ties with the US, and we enjoy an agreement of free association with them.
- Over a period of 12 years, between 1946 and 1958, 67 detonations were conducted in our country. On March 1st, 1954, the hydrogen bomb Castle BRAVO was detonated, with a blast 1000 times greater in power than the Hiroshima bomb. As the late Tony de Brum, former Minister of Foreign Affairs, recalled, on that day 'the sky turned red and it rained for four days

straight. If there was ever a time you thought the world was going to end, it was that day’.

- I recently visited the United States, during which it was reiterated that our alliance is important and strategic to both of us. Being friend with the United States, however, also means that we can have open discussions on difficult topics without jeopardizing our relationship. As I said at this year’s Nuclear Remembrance day, on the 1st March, *Jej Jamin Meloklok*, we will never forget.
- We won’t forget because this is part of our history, which deeply impacted us as a country, as a nation and as a people. Lives were lost, communities were relocated, land was contaminated.
- We still see the legacy of the nuclear testing today. We have an alarming cancer rate; stillbirths, miscarriages, congenital birth defects; reproductive problems are common, as well as mental health issues resulting from the nuclear testing program. The psychological trauma of the survivors and the anxiety of people living near the testing sites today are no less significant.
- Together with the enduring impacts on our health, the reminder of our nuclear past is now embodied by what we call ‘The Dome’, a concrete bunker containing 73,000 cubic meters of radioactive debris, on the Runit island. Because of rising sea levels, saltwater is now intruding the Dome, and causing the leakage of radioactive materials into our ocean. This was also highlighted by the UN Secretary General after his recent visit to the Pacific, and makes this an issue for the whole Pacific, with serious health and environmental consequences.

- We could not stop the tests, but we hope to mitigate their consequences today. Our country's plan of action focuses on treatment and prevention. In 2017, the Nitijela, our Parliament, adopted the Marshall Islands National Nuclear Commission Act of 2017, which established the National Nuclear Commission under the Office of the President.
- Among other tasks, the Commission will develop a strategy to pursue justice, will exercise general oversight of Government ministries, offices, and agencies, and will monitor and assessing the long-lasting effects of the nuclear tests.
- Our painful experience with the nuclear tests, and the effects that we are still suffering – which we usually refer to as our *nuclear legacy* – has made us stronger, prouder and more united.
- It is perhaps this strength that has allowed us to become one of the world's leading voices on climate change. Like nuclear tests, climate change is posing an existential threat to our country, and is already jeopardizing the livelihood of our people. These two issues are now intersecting, as in the case of the Dome.
- Our nature as an atoll nation makes us particularly vulnerable to climate change effects, both slow- and sudden-onset.
- Rising sea levels are eroding our coasts and causing saltwater intrusion into our already limited freshwater reserves. In 2013 and 2016, RMI declared State of Disaster because of droughts. In March 2014, inundation occurred as a result of extremely high tides and a southern swell. Over one thousand

residents of Majuro atoll were forced from their homes, and residents on outer islands including Mili and Arno suffered considerable property and crop damage.

- Because of our latitude, we used to be typhoon-free. However, due to change in climate patterns, typhoons are becoming frequent, and are a huge threat to our homes, infrastructure and economy. For instance, in 2015, Typhoon Nangka cost to the country more than 3% of its GDP in a single night.
- Outer islands are particularly vulnerable. Their remoteness doesn't allow for quick transportation, which is an obstacle to food and water supply in times of drought or intervention during natural disasters.
- As you can see, our past is filled with suffering and challenges. However, do not let this fool you. Our history is also made of big victories and hope. The deep connection we have to our ancestral land and the hurdles that we have endured have fortified us.
- In order to save our country, we have raised our voice on the international arena and started demanding more ambitious climate action from the international community.
- After the world failed to achieve a new climate treaty in Copenhagen, in 2009, we understood that the next time States came together to agree on a new binding text, this would have to be ambitious.

- Ahead of the adoption of the Paris Agreement, we knew that the only way to set a more ambitious goal – keeping the global average temperature rise below 1.5°C – it was necessary that both developed and developing countries came together, showing the world that climate change was not about poor nations versus rich ones, but rather was about the very survival of our Planet and of the world as we know it.
- This is how the High Ambition Coalition was created, a group of countries from the global south and global north that made it possible to include the 1.5°C limit in the Paris text. We were proven right last October, when the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change definitely showed the world that we cannot exceed this threshold, if we want to avoid mass extinctions, large-scale population movements, and scarcity of essential natural resources that would lead to social unrest and conflicts.
- Now that we have the Paris Agreement, we need to implement it. Last December, countries adopted the so-called Paris Rulebook, which sets out the rules that countries will have to follow in order to comply with the Paris Agreement. The Next Conference of the Parties will have to decide on the outstanding issues, such as market mechanisms, which have the potential to undermine the whole architecture if they are not thought carefully.
- But I don't want to bore you with technicalities. What I would like to stress here is the role that each country can play in the fight against climate change. The way the Paris Agreement is structured, it is Parties that decide their level of ambition through their Nationally Determined Contributions, or NDCs.

Unfortunately, science tells us that with the current NDCs, the global average temperature might rise up to almost 4°C, which would be catastrophic for the whole planet.

- The Marshall Islands firmly believe in leading by example. After being a leading voice for the need of an ambitious treaty, we wanted to show the world that we are also ready to act, and give our contribution to the fight against GHG emissions, despite contributing to only 0.0001% of the global emissions. This is why, in November 2018, we were the first country – and still are – to have submitted a new and more ambitious NDC.
- Its ultimate objective is to achieve net zero emissions by 2050 and 100% renewable energy, in line to what the IPCC has indicated as necessary if want to respect the 1.5°C limit. In order to do so, we have committed to reduce our GHG emissions of GHGs to at least 32% below 2010 levels by 2025; to at least 45% below 2010 levels by 2030; and we have an indicative target to reduce GHG emissions by at least 58% below 2010 levels by 2035.
- Our NDC was preceded by our long-term climate strategy, which we adopted in August 2018. The Strategy is called *Tile Til Eo*, ‘lightening the way’, and identifies the action needed sector by sector in order to achieve the 2050 carbon neutrality goal.
- In that case, we were leading the way, as we were one of only 10 countries in the world to have prepared such a strategy. We are pleased to see that a

growing number of countries has announced or started to seriously consider ambitious strategies for decarbonization.

- 2020 will be an important year, as countries will have to submit new or updated NDCs. Conscious of that, last December we reconvened the High Ambition Coalition. After the success of 2015, it was time to remind the international community that time is running out.
- The Statement for Ambition that we adopted calls countries to raise their ambition by 2020, including through: enhanced Nationally Determined Contributions; increased short term action; and long-term low emission development strategies. As of today, 38 countries have signed, and we hope that more and more countries will decide to sign up.
- The Marshall Islands have played a central role in the negotiations on international shipping under the International Maritime Organization. Our position is pretty unique: while we are one of the most vulnerable countries to climate change, we are also the third biggest shipping registry in the world.
- This gives us a big responsibility, and we are heavily invested in seeing that the sector delivers on its commitments.
- In April 2018, members of the IMO came together to reach an historic agreement and adopt its Initial Greenhouse Gas Strategy – committing the international shipping sector to reduce its emissions of greenhouse gases by at least 50% by 2050.

- This was only possible due to a spirit of compromise and a recognition that international shipping must play its full part in achieving the temperature goals of the Paris Agreement and combatting dangerous climate change.
- We are keeping pushing so that the IMO fully implement its Initial Strategy, which must include prioritizing and developing measures that have the potential to achieve further reductions of greenhouse gas emissions before 2023.
- Doing so is critical in order to put emissions from international shipping on a pathway consistent with achieving the levels of ambition in the Initial Strategy.
- While we have been very active on the mitigation front, we shall not forget our huge vulnerability to climate change, which is why I have made adaptation a key priority of my administration.
- We have started the process that will lead to the adoption of our National Adaptation Plan by 2020. This will outline our priorities in terms of adaptation and disaster risk reduction.
- We will make that the process that will lead to the adoption of the National Adaptation Plan will be conducted in a participatory and inclusive manner.

- Conscious of including the affected community, we are already engaging local stakeholders in a number of disaster risk reduction measures. For instance, we are now involving local communities in a participatory hazard risk mapping, which will improve community-based disaster risk management capacity, especially for early warning systems.
- As you can see, we are not afraid to step up and put in place ambitious plans to save our country and pave the way for other countries. However, while we don't lack courage and passion, we lack adequate resources to implement these strategies. In fact, the magnitude of finance required to adapt and provide our people with a pathway to survival greatly surpasses our GDP and the traditionally available public international sector finance.
- To tackle climate change, and help vulnerable countries like ours adapt, we need a radical global re-alignment of finance flows to ensure that trillions in investments by the private sector are compatible with the goals of the Paris Agreement.
- We are setting out clear domestic priorities and generating the enabling environment to facilitate finance flows. However, we now need governments international organizations and the private sector to enable and facilitate the incentives needed to shift financing away from fossil fuels and into green technology.
- Being a vulnerable country, we understand the challenges that vulnerable groups face in the context of climate change. This is why we are now

specifically looking at Youth and women, and are putting in place plans and actions in order to ensure that their needs and perspective are adequately addressed and included in climate change policies and programmes.

- In few decades, my grandchildren might no longer be able to walk on our ancestral land, to which we, the Marshallese, are so deeply and intimately connected. I want my grandchildren to leave their beloved atoll only if they are willing to do so, and not because there is no longer enough fresh water to quench their thirst or enough arable land to feed them.
- I am very proud that the Marshall Islands have been appointed, together with Ireland, co-leaders of the Youth Engagement and Public Mobilization Track ahead of the UN SG Climate Summit. This Summit, on the 23rd of September, will be a key moment for countries to gather, showcase best practices and step up ambition.
- As co-leaders of the Youth track, we will work towards a better of youth voices in the implementation of the Paris Agreement. Climate change is an issue across time and space, and only an inter-national and inter-generational approach will let us find adequate answers to win this battle.
- The Youth I see are full of energy, passion and creativity, and is not scared to speak up and to ask to be heard. The Youth I know have the potential to contribute actively to finding solutions to climatic change, and are not afraid to work hard to achieve it. What Youth needs is the opportunity to engage in

a dialogue, learn from us but also show the shortcomings of the previous generations.

- With this in mind, we are working to propose a number of concrete actions ahead of the Summit. These would include a Youth Summit right before the UNSG Climate Summit, an online hackathon, a Youth Pact for countries' signature and, tentatively, an intergenerational dialogue.
- Young people have the power to bring fresh perspectives and innovative solutions, which we need if we want to ensure that the mitigation, adaptation and disaster risk reduction agendas are implemented in an inclusive and effective manner.
- Women and girls are another group that are often disproportionately affected by climate change. This is why we are including the gender dimension across mitigation, adaptation and disaster risk reduction policies and programmes.
- Our 2050 Strategy and new Nationally Determined Contribution commit to a gender-responsive and human rights-based approach in all mitigation and adaptation planning and implementation.
- Our National Adaptation will integrate a human-rights based approach and will elaborate gender-responsive actions and investments over the next 5-year term to adapt to the impacts of climate change and transition to climate resilience.
- Last year, in the context of the Climate Vulnerable Forum, which we are now chairing, leaders of the 48 member countries highlighted the special leadership and engagement of women in tackling climate change, including

through an all-women group of “Summit Champions” appointed in conjunction with our Virtual Summit.

- In March 2019, I convened the first Pacific Women Leaders’ Coalition Conference. This included women heads of states and governments, members of Parliament, representatives of regional organizations, the academia, the private sector, and the civil society. One of the thematic areas was ‘Women in Leadership’, which underlined the need for increased opportunities for women and girls to emerge as leaders.
- Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, building upon on the experience and leadership that we have developed over the years in the field of climate change, we have decided that this was the right time for us to open our permanent mission in Geneva.
- The United Nations are the primary multilateral platform for small States, where we can all sit together as equals. We will make use of this platform to raise all the issues that I have shared with you and that are very urgent for us, from a human rights perspective.
- We are already engaging in conversations on the impact of climate change on fundamental human rights, and we will use the platform offered by the Human Rights Council to raise, in a constructive manner, the issue of our nuclear legacy.
- We will actively advocate for better recognition and realization of the rights of women and girls, and for the adequate protection of human rights defenders.

Without their active presence and freedom, we would place at risk one of the most vital links to the voices of right-holders.

- From a more procedural perspective, we will work around three pillars.
- First, we want to ensure accountability and an active dialogue. We think that direct dialogue is essential if we want, as a community, to solve complex issues. This is why we will call for a greater inclusion and participation of small states and vulnerable communities. Our decision to run for the Human Rights Council membership for the 2020-2022 term is a proof of that.
- Related to this, we will advocate for strengthening the HRC SIDS/LDCs Trust Fund. This has been crucial for us to participate in the Human Rights Council sessions when we didn't have a mission here.
- Finally, we will actively engage in the reform process of the Human Rights Council, and will seek increased coherence between multiple reporting cycles. For a small country like us, being party to a great number of human right treaties also mean bearing their consequent reporting burden. We understand that this can be a huge obstacle for small nations to ratify those core conventions or comply with their reporting requirements.
- When launching our candidacy to the Human Rights Council, we committed to a number of actions at the national level, which we have already circulated among States.
- Our main goal is to strengthen our national human rights record. This will be done by reinforcing our existing National Human Rights Committee, passing legislation against discrimination, with special attention to gender and

disabilities, and make sure that our National Nuclear Commission operates in a coordinated and effective manner.

- We have reiterated our standing invitation to special procedures, and will continue to engage in a constructive manner with their follow-up and recommendations.
- Trafficking in persons and illegal adoptions are, unfortunately, some of our biggest challenges, and we have already taken steps to counter them. We have passed ad hoc legislation, and are now considering the ratification of the 2000 UN Trafficking in Persons Protocol and of the Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Inter-country Adoption.
- So far, we have acceded to or ratified 11 core human rights instruments and optional protocols, and we now have one of the highest rates of treaty participation in the Pacific islands region.
- The opening of our permanent mission is only the start. I wish to thank Switzerland and UNOG for the invaluable support they have provided us, as without their help, this might not have been possible.
- International Geneva does not only comprise the United Nations. Just by looking at this room it is evident that its strength is in its diversity. Non-governmental organizations, academic institutions, foundations, and the private sector all play a crucial role in advancing human rights and sustainability, complementing the work that international organizations are already conducting.

- As our experience with the High Ambition Coalition and Climate Vulnerable Forum has showed us, together we are stronger. I am confident that we will find common grounds to work together and tackle global challenges.
- Thank you for your attention, and we look forward to starting this new adventure.
- Kommol tata.