



KIRIBATI STATEMENT

2ND SESSION OF GLOBAL PLATFORM FOR DISASTER RISK REDUCTION CONFERENCE

16 – 19 JUNE 2009

GENEVA

Delivered by His Excellency Anote Tong

The President of the Republic of Kiribati

Mr. Chairman

Excellencies

Mr. Secretary- General of the United Nations

Distinguished Delegates

Ladies and Gentlemen

I bring warm greetings to you all from the Government and people of the Republic of Kiribati on whose behalf I am honoured to address this Second Session of the Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction. I wish also to take this opportunity to extend warm greetings on behalf of the countries of the Pacific, representatives of some of whom are also here in Geneva with me. Indeed, this Platform sees a significant increase in participation of the Pacific region; totalling more than 20 delegates as compared to only 2 in 2007.

At the outset, allow me to convey my deep gratitude to you Mr. Chairman for the kind invitation of the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction that you have extended to me and to all our Pacific delegates.

Chairman, I acknowledge with appreciation the great work of the United Nations through the UNISDR and other agencies over the past decades for putting to the forefront adaptation and mitigation programmes that will help prepare countries of the world to stand and rise to meet the multi-faceted challenges of our time. The theme of *Invest Today for a Safer Tomorrow* is very suited to the kind of preparedness that we would all like to engage in meaningfully in the spirit of full cooperation.

Chairman, our interest and commitment to participate in this important Conference reflects our common understanding and acknowledgement of the fact that the challenges we face today are those, we, as individual nations, can not deal with alone.

Climate Change presents unique challenges for the Pacific Region. In the last fortnight the United Nations General Assembly passed a historic resolution that recognises the unique threat that climate change presents to the security of Pacific Island Nations. There is no longer any doubt that climate change is exacerbating disaster risk and is compounding the vulnerability of Pacific communities. We must invest heavily now in building a more resilient future.

It is therefore timely that we all combine our efforts in such a way that small Pacific Island Countries, like Kiribati, are provided with the assistance required to face the challenges of Climate Change; other regional hazards such as earthquakes, tsunami and cyclones; the challenges of increasing prices of foods and fuel especially in the remote rural and developing island nations; the financial downturn and many more. This is really a time for us all to invest for a safer and brighter tomorrow.

Chairman,

Investing in disaster risk reduction is indeed a wise initiative as it will help reduce poverty, safeguard development and links positively with climate change adaptation. Such investment will also have favourable impacts on global security, economic stability and environmental sustainability. I totally agree with the Hyogo Framework for Action, that we in the Pacific have adopted with adaptations as a guide in the Pacific through the Pacific Disaster Risk Reduction and Disaster Management Framework for Action 2005 – 2015, as it is really an investment towards building a more secure, stable, sustainable and equitable future for us all.

Chairman,

Let me for a minute or two provide you with developments my Government has done to align our efforts with that of the global community.

Kiribati is one of the countries experiencing the increasing effects of climate change through rising sea level. Over the past few years we are seeing whole villages having to be entirely relocated, increasing demands for the construction of sea defences to protect public infrastructure and private property as sea water intrudes into food crop production sites and the fresh water lens. Given the projected scenario of events it would seem a futile battle for us but we have no other choice but to persevere, to continue to identify any and all possible options. We appreciate that there must be short term adaptation measures simply to maintain the delivery of basic necessities to our people on a daily basis in the decades ahead. We have also accepted the reality that in the longer term our islands will increasingly become unable to sustain the current levels of population and acknowledge the ultimate need to relocate our people.

Our short term program involves mainstreaming of adaptation measures by integrating them into our budget, programs to strengthen the disaster risk management. Because of the cross cutting nature of the different issues involved and in order to avoid the usual bureaucratic disputes, oversight and coordination of our disaster risk and mitigation management programs is supervised by the Office of the President. Membership includes officials from appropriate Ministries of Government, Non Government Organisations and Civil Societies.

Mr. Chairman,

We are actively involved in the building of sea walls to protect important infrastructure. To complement this effort but due to the fragile nature of our atoll islands this very activity may in fact be contributing to the problem. In acknowledgement of this we will soon implement a joint major undertaking to start an offshore mining project which will see the eventual elimination of foreshore aggregate. Mr. Chairman, I would like to take the opportunity at this point, to acknowledge the combined contributions by our multilateral organizations, SOPAC for their technical input and of course the European Union for the relentless funding support for the many programs including this initiative.

Mr. Chairman, my country is fortunate in that we do not face the severe weather phenomena unlike our neighbours in our region and globally. We are indeed fortunate for this but we on

the other hand face the silent and impending catastrophic effects of sea level rise. Earlier this year, Potsdam Institute scientists provided to AOSIS delegates, Kiribati included, alarming data which I must say Mr. Chairman is backed with unequivocal proof that indeed Kiribati shared the fate with other low lying coral atolls of eventual relocation in less than 50 years time.

Mr. Chairman

Sea water inundation of our islands may bring forward d-day for us by another say 10 to 15 years. To address this, we have engaged in and mainstreamed longer term adaptation programs to better prepare our people for possible eventual relocation. It is our proposition Mr. Chairman that through an intensive program of upskilling our people we will be able to equip them with the necessary skills and knowledge so that they will be able access their new homes with confidence and the dignity.

Such a program has already been initiated through the innovative models developed with our development-adaptation partners in the New Zealand and Australian Government.

Under the Pacific Access Category Scheme (PAC) New Zealand provides a migration quota to Pacific Island countries including Kiribati on an annual basis. With the Australian Government the Pacific countries have the Australia – Pacific Technical Colleges (APTC) scheme which provides international standard qualification training thus allowing access for our people to the international labour markets. We also have a pilot program, the Kiribati-Australia Nursing Initiative (KANI) under which a number of our student nurses are trained to international standards in Australian institutions. We acknowledge with gratitude these innovative programs by our two development partners and indeed invite consideration of these models by other partner countries.

Chairman,

As we all understand the impacts of disasters are getting worse due to issues such as unplanned and unchecked urbanisation; unsustainable socioeconomic development; limited access to reliable livelihoods and; ecosystem degradation. These elements linked to climate change exacerbate the impacts. This is the point that draws us together, to help each other to find effective and practical ways to reverse the trend through the adoption of integrated policy frameworks, increased investments and more effective institutions and partnerships amongst us all. In doing so, the world will be able to achieve the Hyogo Framework for Action's strategic goals by 2015 and securing progress towards the Millennium Development Goals.

Chairman,

Disasters tend to have less impact on economic growth in countries with large economies and diverse resource bases. At the other end of the scale are small, vulnerable economies, such as in Pacific Islands and my country, Kiribati. We have little economic resilience to the impacts of major disasters and it can take many years for full recovery to occur. This in turn threatens

our ability to achieve against our ongoing development goals and ultimately the wellbeing and security of our communities.

We are aware that a rise of 2°C in the planet's surface temperature from pre-industrial levels has the potential for catastrophic collapse in ecosystems upon which our communities are directly dependant; for example coral reef fisheries. Such will have a disproportionate impact on the most impoverished. These changes in climate threaten to undermine the subsistence economies and resilience of Pacific Island Countries and this combination of increasing hazard risk and decreasing resilience makes climate change a global driver of the need for improved disaster risk management and mitigation. Addressing such risk will require renewed effort to fully integrate disaster risk management and “no regrets” climate change adaptation strategies.

Chairman,

In preparation for this, Kiribati seriously counts the importance of short-term measures in which we must realise significant investments in disaster risk reduction. On the other hand, relocation of our people to new homes is also my Government's priority in light of the supreme disaster – when my country will become unliveable due to sea level rise in less than 50 years time from now.

In my country and others in the region we realise that we must first and foremost lead the way and take what responsibility we can to reduce vulnerability through sound achievable local actions.

We also have the Kiribati Adaptation Project, KAP in short, implemented by the World Bank which focuses on the collection of data and profile of islands affected by Climate Change, conducting of public awareness programmes to remind the general public of their important roles in the national process of adaptation. This project, kindly funded by the UN-GEF, the Australian and New Zealand governments, is now in the phase that will tangibly help address water scarcity and coastal erosion problems. Before end of 2010, water tanks will be put up in town and outer island areas identified to be mostly affected. Also our central hospital and International Airport will be protected from further coastal erosion as new seawalls will be built. At end of 2010, this KAP will end but we have received positive indications that a new and far bigger project will be implemented to build on the strengths of the KAP. The scope of this new project, as I will suggest it, will pursue actual investments in infrastructure and services that will minimise risks inflicted by prolonged droughts and seawater level rise.

Chairman,

Our failure to address these key risk drivers in an integrated manner, the results will be in the dramatic increases in vulnerability, disaster risk and associated poverty and instability. This is why I stress with urgency the need for an integrated approach to addressing these drivers so the risks are reduced, human development is protected and climate change adaptation is facilitated. Rather than an expense, this has to be seen as an investment towards building a more secure, stable, sustainable and equitable future.

Chairman,

We have been spending time talking and planning. What is needed now is Action! The December 2009 Copenhagen Conference on Climate Change will provide an unprecedented opportunity to establish an effective multilateral framework to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and support climate change adaptation. Such an outcome is essential if potentially catastrophic increases in disaster impacts and associated poverty outcomes are to be avoided, particularly in disaster-prone developing countries like my country Kiribati, which is just two metres above sea level.

Chairman,

Once again, I am grateful to be here and I strongly urge the United Nations and all its members to engage tangibly in adopting the integrated policy frameworks, increased investments and more effective institutions and partnerships. I also urge the International community to act now rather than later! We, from the Small Island Nations, need to engage in the investment process but owing to our limited resources, which are far outpaced by the accelerated rate of Climate Change impacts, we cannot do much. Though we have a Disaster Management Office, the main constrains we continue to face is in financing the necessary investments and the needed responses to natural disasters.

Chairman,

Investing today to strengthen capacities is vital if future generations are to enjoy a safer tomorrow.

With these words, I closing let me share with you our traditional blessings of Te Mauri (Health), Te Raoi (Peace) ao Te Tabemoa (Prosperity).

Thank You
