



H.E BERETITENTI ANOTE TONG'S STATEMENT

(5th Global Oceans Conference, Paris, Thursday 6 May 2010)

Mr. Chairman

Panellists

Distinguished delegates

Ladies and gentlemen

Kam na mauri and good afternoon

I am very pleased to be here this afternoon to address you on the topic: 'Implementation and Financing Strategies for Adaptation to Climate Change Impacts on Oceans, Islands and Small Island Developing States'; under the theme of *Ensuring Survival*.

My remarks will be based on our experience in Kiribati which will undoubtedly be the same for other low lying vulnerable countries. I will cover the impacts of climate change, our adaptation options, the need for adaptation financing, and a possible formula for adaptation financing for addressing this gross (climate change) injustice.

For those of you who are not familiar with my country, please allow me to share some basic facts so that you can better understand the context of my remarks.

Kiribati consists of 33 very low-lying atolls in the Pacific Ocean straddling the Equator. These atolls, which are narrow strips of land rising no more than two metres above sea level and totalling 811 square kilometres in area, are scattered across the 3.5 million square kilometres of our Exclusive Economic Zone. We are truly a nation of water. Our population of around 100,000 are virtually sea dwellers or may well be by the second half of the century if nothing is done about climate change and its impacts.

Climate Change Impacts

Climate change affects all nations of this planet but in varying degrees. The irony, however, is that it is the poorest and the smallest countries with the least contribution of greenhouse gases which are paying the ultimate price, in order that the lifestyles and development agenda of some countries may be maintained.

The science on climate change is unequivocal in spite of the alleged flaw on some data. It is conclusive that sea level rise and increasing acidification of our oceans are some of the impacts of climate change and all are a direct result of the industrial processes undertaken in the name of development.

I have said at forum after forum that for low lying island countries like Kiribati, Tuvalu, the Maldives, the Marshall Islands and other similarly vulnerable countries, climate change is a matter of security and of survival. Already we are witnessing major damages to infrastructure and property as a consequence of higher than normal tides and storm surges. Coastal erosion in heavily populated areas is occurring at a

rate that exceeds Government's capacity to respond. Lack of resources is exacerbating the situation - coastlines continue to be eroded as homes and property continue to be damaged. Long before our islands are inundated by the rising seas, they will become uninhabitable as freshwater aquifers are contaminated by saltwater intrusion from sea level rise.

Climate Change Adaptation Options

In a pre-emptive move, we have begun a comprehensive evaluation of the options open to us in the face of the different scenarios of projected sea level rise. Obviously, our strong preference is to maintain the integrity of our homeland as far as that is possible. Initially, this will involve building sea defences and raising land elevation. However, we must also be prepared to consider more drastic measures as necessary. It is possible that technology may provide a solution, such as the novel concept of building floating islands. However, we cannot ignore the fact that, eventually, we may be forced to relocate entirely, but this can only be an option of last resort.

Our experience is that our short term strategy of responding on an ad hoc basis to the repair works that need to be addressed as and when they occur is doomed to failure unless more resources can be made available.

The medium term adaptation strategy that we have embarked upon involves an assessment of what must be done to protect the coastlines and property from continued erosion and damage. We are also looking at what can be done to maximise the availability of fresh water, in the face of the threat to our aquifers. An assessment will also be done to determine action necessary to preserve the integrity and sustainability of our oceans – both within our national jurisdiction and beyond –

in the face of climate change. I do not wish to repeat what has been discussed in the past few days on this particular issue. Suffice to say that for coastal and island States like Kiribati, the ocean is an integral part of our everyday lives, cultures, and existence and a significantly greater collective effort is required to conserve and manage our oceans. The healthier our ocean, the healthier our islands and our people.

Our long term adaptation measures focus on preparing our people for the inevitable and unthinkable - forced relocation. Such a program has to be gradual involving a whole-of-nation approach. It involves the upskilling of our people so they can compete for employment on the international labour market. With the skills they acquire we hope that they will be able to settle in those countries in which they seek employment. Already there are schemes in place with Australia and New Zealand based on this model. The bottom line is that if and when our people do relocate it must be on merit and with dignity. The question is how should the international community participate in this adaptation strategy?

I have been criticized by many at home and abroad that my Government's merit-based relocation strategy is defeatist. They say that we are giving in to the demands of polluting countries that they be permitted to carry on with business as usual. I reject this. We must be pragmatic and act on what the science is telling us. Furthermore, we need to begin the process now before it is too late. We cannot wait until the water is lapping around our ankles before taking action. But it remains an option of last resort in the absence of other options available to us.

Marine Adaptation Challenges

So far, much of the focus of attention on the impacts of climate change and the adaptation measures needed has been on the terrestrial and coastal zones and ecosystems and resources therein. I believe, however, that for those countries which are more oceanic in nature and heavily dependent on their oceans for their livelihood and economic security there is a strong case for the international community to give this aspect of the issue greater prominence. The adaptation challenges relating to oceans and climate change include increasing acidification of the oceans, implications of receding coastlines or indeed total submergence of islands on maritime boundaries, shift in fish stock migratory patterns and so on.

The proposed Pacific Oceanscape, with its multi-sectoral approach under which all stakeholders cooperate to conserve the biodiversity, increase the resilience and security of our natural ecosystems on which our communities depend, is an attempt to address this oversight. It looks at peoples, islands, ocean resources and issues through three main components, namely: ocean arcs; ocean security and climate change; and leadership and learning. These components reflect the three Conference themes of ensuring survival, preserving life and improving governance.

We recognize that these adaptation measures will require major investments that are beyond our capacity as a government. We are optimistic that we will be able to mobilise significant support for this initiative from the international community.

Adaptation Financing

There is international consensus on the need for adaptation financing but there is no consensus on who should pay and how much. This is evident through the

establishment of adaptation funds under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Kyoto Protocol which have seen inadequate provision of financing since their establishment. Even in Copenhagen, pledges for a 'fast-start' fund of billions of dollars to assist developing countries with urgent adaptation needs are yet to see the light of day. The longer the delay in delivering this much needed financing for urgent adaptation, the greater the impact on our people and environment, and the higher the cost.

Existing funds, such as the LDC Fund, finance the development of national adaptation plans and strategies. Much of the funding has so far been directed to consultancies rather than towards concrete infrastructural programs which directly address the immediate adaptation needs of our people. While plans and strategies are a crucial part of the adaptation process, they will be worthless without the resources needed to implement them. This is the case for most of countries with similar programs.

For longer-term adaptation strategies to be effective, predictable, adequate, sustainable and long-term financing is necessary. Funding must be made available for the development and implementation of innovative proposals such as the floating island concept and relocation strategy.

But the question is who pays for adaptation? I am sure we all know what and who are responsible for climate change but are those responsible willing to step up to their responsibilities? This was one of the issues at the heart of the Copenhagen experience; who should pay and how much? Answers to this will differ depending on which side of the climate change divide one stands. But should it depend on how big

or small one is? I do not believe so. So until an internationally agreed regulatory regime can be concluded these questions will remain unanswered.

As our experience indicated, the most vulnerable countries are already involved in adaptation measures simply to keep the tide at bay, infrastructure safe and life viable. And as the problem becomes more extensive and intensive the need for resources is well overdue so we sincerely hope that the debate will conclude soon, followed immediately by action.

Conclusion

In spite of our continuous appeals for appropriate collective international action, the response so far has been well short of expectations. We applaud the unilateral action taken by some countries to reduce their emissions, demonstrating true leadership at this critical moment in the history of the planet. These countries are willing to make the necessary sacrifices so that others may exercise the right to survive. We invite those countries willing to make the sacrifice, but which have so far adopted the wait and see attitude for fear of losing their competitive edge, to go ahead and do the right thing. Climate change is perhaps the greatest contemporary challenge of our moral values since slavery and apartheid. As an international community we readily condemn terrorism, genocide and nuclear proliferation; yet why can we not see the gross injustice of our inaction on climate change?