

STATEMENT BY

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Mr President, Honourable Ministers, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen.

Allow me first of all to extend warm greetings and sincere regrets from the Honourable Mr Norman George, Minister for Environment and Deputy Prime Minister of the Cook Islands for his inability to be with us because of pressing Parliamentary obligations back home.

Let me also extend my delegation's sincere appreciation through you, Mr President, to your Government and people, for the gracious hospitality extended to us.

We in the Cook Islands are not alone in realising our vulnerability to climate change, and like all other small island countries, we feel particularly vulnerable in the face of environmental changes that result from human activities for which we are not responsible and over which we have no control. We have faced some of the worst hurricanes and storms that have ravaged our coastlines and caused great devastation to property and, indeed, loss of life.

During the economic reform process in 1996/1997, we lost one third of our population through out-migration, and the down-sizing of the public service by over 50%.

In conveying this information to you, Mr President and Honourable Ministers, I want to re-emphasise, and to remind this Conference, especially the developed countries that for our small island countries, participation by even two representatives at this Conference and its subsidiary bodies year in and year out, limits our involvement at these very important negotiations.

I wish to acknowledge the efforts of Ambassador Neroni Slade and Ambassador John Ash, Chairman and Vice-Chairman respectively of the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) for the opportunity to strengthen our participation in climate negotiations at both the regional and international levels.

The Government of the Cook Islands has sent us here with one purpose in mind - to assist in the process of ensuring that the global community might at least live up to the small part of the high expectations of Rio as reflected in the Kyoto Protocol. The hope of the Cook Islands and that of all Pacific Island nations is that the Protocol will be brought into effect by 2002.

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Evidence of the Cook Islands' further commitment to COP6 is our acceptance of the Netherland Government's invitation for two of our youth to participate at the first Youth Conference on Climate Change.

The Guam Ministerial Statement arising from the Environment Ministers Forum of the South Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP) member countries, held last month reiterated "their deep concerns about the adverse impact of human-induced climate change, natural climate variability and sea level rise on all Pacific Islands, especially low-lying atolls".

Pacific Ministers also recognised the importance of the Kyoto Protocol which provide first steps towards effective global actions to combat climate change. In addition, they encouraged all countries to make every effort to work towards a resolution of all outstanding negotiating issues at COP6 and thereby ensure the environmental integrity of the Protocol. The Ministers further sought to ensure that the implementation of the Protocol will result in real and measurable reductions in greenhouse gas emissions as well as the early entry into force of the Protocol by 2002.

As already stated on behalf of AOSIS by the Honourable Tuala Sale Tagaloa, Minister for Lands, Survey and Environment of Samoa, the causes of the issues before this Conference are as well known as are the most simple and effective solutions. That all these elements have been shrouded under a cloak of pure, modern mysticism is a crime against humanity. We can understand the vested interests, but cannot accept them.

One of the points I would like to emphasise is that there is a real need for additional financial resources by developed countries as a core commitment under Articles 4.3 and 4.7 of the Convention. In this context, the Convention also clearly states the extent to which developed countries are to assist developing country parties to fulfil their obligations. I would also like to stress the importance of Annex I Parties reducing their industrial emissions of greenhouse gases and assisting developing countries in the implementation of adaptation response measures; technology transfer; and capacity building.

It is pertinent to recall at this point of our negotiations that we, in the Cook Islands were disappointed by the final text of the Kyoto Protocol especially after the promise and commitment of the Rio Earth Summit. Nevertheless, with no alternative, we suppressed our worst fears and dared to hope that the Protocol might serve as a beacon of hope that might yet revive the spirit of global responsibility and togetherness that Rio had engendered in all of us.

I would like to reinforce the statement by His Excellency Mr Alhaji Sani Zangon Daura, Minister for Environment, Nigeria, on behalf of the G77 and China Group, stating the "time for action is now". We cannot await final, conclusive evidence of sea level rise because once we reach that stage it will already be too late for our coral atolls in particular.

Mr President, the prayer of the people of the Cook Islands, is that this Conference will rise to the first serious challenge in this millenium to global responsibility that this Conference has been entrusted with. I do not want my children or grandchildren to say that I failed them. I am certain that no one in this Conference will want to be so identified.
