



REPUBLIC OF KIRIBATI

**Statement
by**

His Excellency Anote Tong

President of the Republic of Kiribati

**The General Debate of the 63rd Session of
the United Nations General Assembly**

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(Check against delivery)

Mr. President
Excellencies
Mr. Secretary-General
Distinguished Delegates
Ladies and Gentlemen

I bring warm greetings from the Government and the people of the Republic of Kiribati on whose behalf I am honoured to address this august body this morning.

Kam na mauri!

Allow me, at the outset, to congratulate you, Mr. President, on your election to the presidency of the sixty-third session. I am confident that you will provide an efficient and effective leadership of our session towards a productive and concrete outcome for all. I would also like to thank your predecessor for the able and effective leadership over the past session. I acknowledge the appointment of the Solomon Islands to the vice-presidency of this session. We are indeed very proud to have a Pacific brother in that chair.

Mr. President,

Every year we come together as citizens of the international community to reflect on and discuss possible solutions to the daunting challenges that continue to face us individually and collectively. Climate change and sea level rise, environmental protection, food and fuel price increases, achieving the MDGs, and others are some of those challenges that I wish to focus on, in the interest of time and brevity.

Climate Change

Mr. President,

For many years, we have tirelessly appealed to this organisation to do something about climate change and to provide solutions for those seriously affected by its detrimental impact, especially those whose very existence are being threatened. These appeals have failed to produce practical solutions for people living in low-lying Small Island Developing States like Kiribati. While the international community continues to point fingers at each other regarding responsibility for and leadership on this issue, our people continue to experience the impact of climate change and sea level rise. And practical solutions continue to evade us.

Mr. President,

The science on climate change is irrefutable. The Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change projected an increase in sea level of 0.4 metres within this century. While this may sound minimal to most, it is quite alarming for low-lying Small Island Developing States like Kiribati whose elevation

is no more than two metres above sea level and whose main source of water comes from underground aquifers. Before our islands are inundated by the rising sea, saltwater intrusion into our freshwater lens will render the islands uninhabitable. With the projected sea level rise, Kiribati could be looking at 50 to 60 years before this eventuates.

Presented with these findings we have had to adopt a pragmatic approach and formulate options for our people. We do so with much regret and frustration.

Mr. President,

Mitigation and adaptation strategies are and will continue to be integral components of our response to climate change. It would indeed be naïve to suggest otherwise. These strategies only provide short- and medium-term solutions. Ultimately, low-lying island countries like Kiribati will have to face up to the reality of their islands being unable to support life and to plan accordingly beyond existing adaptation strategies. Kiribati is not a major emitter of greenhouse gases. Its mitigation efforts would therefore be insignificant on the global climate change situation. Nevertheless we will do our part and explore appropriate renewable and efficient energy technology as well as promote replanting in our islands.

While we also require adaptation strategies, our adaptation options are extremely limited, particularly given the nature of our islands. We are a country of low-lying coral atolls with most islands rising no more than two metres above sea level. Coastal protection through seawall construction is the main adaptation measure currently undertaken by Government but this is limited to the protection of public infrastructure. We simply do not have the resources to extend the protection to private properties. Adaptation measures of moving inland and to higher ground is impractical for us. We cannot move further inland due to the narrowness of our islands nor are there higher grounds to which we could escape from the rising seas.

Mr. President,

It is encouraging indeed to follow the emergence of many climate change initiatives. It gives us hope to see that humanity is beginning to do the right thing. We have been following developments on these fronts and I take this opportunity to acknowledge Australia's commitment to the Kyoto Protocol coupled with its recent announcement of its climate change programme. New Zealand has also announced its pledge to increase financial support for climate change. We also welcome Japan's Cool Earth Promotion Programme and the European Union Global Climate Change Alliance (GCCA) that support practical measures to address the impacts of climate change in the Pacific Island Countries.

Mr. President,

The IPCC report also states that the concentration of greenhouse gases already in the atmosphere will continue the momentum of climate change, regardless of substantial reduction in greenhouse gas emissions and mitigation efforts. This effectively means that low-lying Small Island Developing States like Kiribati are on

the frontline of the climate change calamity. Mitigation efforts, therefore, will not be able to reverse our situation – a situation that we have recently acknowledged and to which my Government has provided a long-term strategy for our people's future survival.

In the previous session of this assembly, the President raised questions of what we will do when people start fleeing their countries, not because of political persecution, but because of environmental catastrophe. This is the question that I want to put forward as a challenge for this session and to which I wish to provide a possible answer, at least from the perspective of a country whose very existence is under serious threat. The relocation of the 100,000 people of Kiribati, for example, cannot be done overnight. It requires long term forward planning and the sooner we act, the less stressful and the less painful it would be for all concerned.

This is why my Government has developed a long-term merit-based relocation strategy as an option for our people. As leaders, it is our duty to the people we serve to prepare them for the worst-case scenario.

This strategy involves the upskilling of our people to make them competitive and marketable at international labour markets. We want to target labour markets where skills or labour gaps exist and provide those labour for them. We believe this offers a win-win situation for all. We shall be able to provide countries with labour and those countries shall be able to provide potential new homes for our people. The strategy provides our people with an option so that when they choose to migrate, they will migrate on merit and with dignity. They will be received by their adopted countries not as burdens, but as worthwhile members of the community.

We have already started implementing this strategy and we are indeed encouraged by and grateful for the support of this approach amongst our regional partners in the Pacific. Under its Pacific Access Category Scheme, New Zealand randomly picks a certain number of people from certain Pacific island countries, including Kiribati, to migrate to New Zealand every year. Recently, Australia launched the Australia Pacific Technical College which aims at training Pacific people with Australian standard qualifications that will allow them to access regional and international labour markets. The bilateral Kiribati-Australia Nursing Initiative (KANI) is another example of a programme that supports this long-term strategy.

Mr. President

At the regional level, the Pacific Islands Forum Leaders in August adopted the Niue Declaration on Climate Change. This is a reflection of our concerted regional efforts to respond to the adverse impacts of climate change which had been severely felt across our region. The Declaration marks a new chapter in initiating the first ever high-level climate change declaration for our part of the world and calls for collective efforts to fight the growing threat of climate change to many aspects of our lives and future as nations.

At the international level, we have been following closely the issues of focus currently taking precedence on the United Nations agenda and it is indeed pleasing

to note that climate change is finally been given due recognition as a security issue. We welcome this development, as we believe it is time the United Nations focus its attention on the human dimension of climate change. Discussions about carbon trading, the post Kyoto Protocol era and even concerns over the future of the polar bears have been or are being held. We welcome these discussions. At the same time I am deeply concerned that there has never been a discussion of the fate of humans whose very existence is seriously undermined by climate change.

This is the challenge that I pose to this body, to you, Mr. President, and to the Secretary General to address during this session.

On this note, I commend to you the draft resolution on climate change as a security issue and a threat to international peace and security which, I understand, has been tabled before this session. I applaud the excellent efforts by our Pacific Ambassadors in New York for their leadership on this draft resolution and those who have supported the draft resolution so far. We, in the Pacific, have been strong supporters of the fight against terrorism. We now turn to those we have partnered in the fight against terrorism to partner us in our fight against climate change.

Phoenix Islands Protected Area (PIPA)

Kiribati is proud to be home to the Phoenix Islands Protected Area (PIPA), the largest marine protected area in the world. This is a result of a collaborative effort and partnership between Kiribati, the New England Aquarium, and Conservation International. The Phoenix Islands Protected Area covers an area of around 410,500 square kilometres, making it, for now, the planet's largest marine protected area.

PIPA covers over 11 per cent of Kiribati's exclusive economic zone, while the land area included in PIPA is over three-and-a-half per cent of the total land mass of Kiribati.

The Phoenix Islands are some of the most isolated islands on earth and are largely untouched by man. In 2002, the countries of the world made a commitment to significantly reduce the current rate of biodiversity loss by 2010. Our declaration of PIPA is in part a contribution towards meeting that target.

The preservation of these islands and the surrounding ocean is our gift to humanity, of which we are a part. Even now, as we confront the possibility that our islands will become uninhabitable within the century due to the rising seas, we recognise the value of protecting something that we believe to be the common heritage of all.

I take this opportunity to acknowledge the invaluable support and contribution of the New England Aquarium and Conservation International, our partners in this endeavour. We invite Governments, inter-governmental organisations, NGOs, members of the private sector and individuals to join us in this worthwhile and ambitious initiative.

Food and Energy Issues

The recent hike in food and fuel prices is being felt by all, but more acutely by those living in drought-prone, resource poor, and infertile Small Island Developing States like Kiribati who, as a consequence, depend highly on imported food. Our isolation from major markets means that the cost of transporting these food items to our country is becoming more and more expensive. In addition, the cost of providing basic services to our people living on our widely scattered islands is also becoming a real challenge for us and indeed for those in similar situations.

We acknowledge the ability of certain members of this organisation to address this global challenge and we appeal to them to assist the most vulnerable members like Kiribati with their food and energy security strategies. In this regard, we acknowledge with appreciation the assistance of our development partners, such as Japan and Korea, to our energy security strategy.

LDC Graduation

Mr. President,

Early next year, the Expert Group will meet to prepare the 2009 review of countries which are deemed eligible to be graduated under the UN methodology and indicators. Kiribati is one of three Pacific LDCs – the others being Tuvalu and Vanuatu - to be considered for graduation. We believe there are pertinent issues that warrant proper consideration by the United Nations with regard to this process. This is the issue of extreme economic vulnerability of the SIDS. The current indicators focus on improved performance on income per capita and human assets. Due consideration should be accorded to the special economic vulnerability to external shocks such as the rising world food and fuel prices.

While it is not currently an LDC graduation indicator, environmental vulnerability should be taken into account when considering the cases of Small Island Developing States like Kiribati, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu which are among the most vulnerable to the impact of climate change and extreme weather events. These in turn pose major challenges to their sustainable development efforts.

On this note, I wish to commend my Pacific colleagues who had advocated the need to reform the application of the rule of graduation. We reiterate this call and urge the UN to reconsider the graduation rule in light of the special economic situation and vulnerability of these island nations to climate change and external shocks.

Millennium Development Goals

As many fellow members would similarly share, we have a genuine desire to progress the development aspirations of our peoples and we take that as our priority. Even with our limited capacity, we are committed to the implementation of

the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). On this note, I am pleased to report that Kiribati has launched its first report on the Millennium Development Goals. The report outlines weaknesses and strengths in the overall development efforts and in meeting the MDGs. We are on track with our progress on most of the goals but behind with some goals. The main reason for this is lack of data to measure our progress so far and limited resources to implement strategies aimed at achieving these goals. We will continue to exert our efforts in meeting the targeted goals by 2015. At this time, I wish to express our appreciation to our development partners who have accompanied us on this journey and had contributed meaningfully to the realization of our development aspirations.

Taiwan

Mr. President,

While we commend the United Nations for the many initiatives put forward in addressing the need of its members, it is regretful that it has continued to deny the 23 million people in Taiwan equal rights as international citizens to participate fully in world affairs. Taiwan has demonstrated an active contribution which has enriched the lives of many in their collaborative efforts in building and securing international peace and security.

The people of Taiwan should be accorded the same fundamental right to participate as fellow citizens of this international community and to be allowed to contribute meaningfully in various sectors of the organisation's activities.

Conclusion

Mr. President,

The challenges we face are global in nature and thus require global solutions. We call upon the UN to take the lead in addressing these challenges, especially in funding, supporting and facilitating the implementation of practical solutions to the security challenges that threaten the very existence of peoples and nations, which in turn pose a threat to international peace and security.

Mr. President,

Allow me to conclude by bestowing upon you all our Kiribati blessing of Te Mauri (Health), Te Raoi (Peace) ao Te Tabomoa (Prosperity).

Thank you.