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MINISTER FOR THE ENVIRONMENT
ASSOCIATE MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS & TRADE (ODA)**

Your Excellencies.

We meet together in Mauritius because we believe that small island states face challenges different from others. I must take this opportunity to thank the Hon Paul Berenger for sharing his beautiful island with us. We have been charmed by your sparkling waters, the sound of waves, your fresh air and seafood.

We meet just 18 days after a powerful tsunami has reminded us just how fragile a hold we humans have on our planet.

Most importantly, we meet because we believe that solutions lie not only in the actions of individual SIDS, but also in coordinated global action.

We have focused on problems specific to small islands and on solutions.

New Zealand has taken its responsibilities at this forum very seriously, because as a Pacific nation, our families and friends are the small island developing states of the Pacific Forum. Our histories and our future are very much interwoven.

We heard that small islands have a particular physical vulnerability — not just from natural disasters, but threats from climate change and the loss of biodiversity on which so many small island livelihoods depend. We also heard that different island states have differing abilities to respond:

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when your widest point is 300 meters and your highest point 9 metres, your planning and policy choices are limited. Whatever the differences, island states do have a heightened vulnerability.

The solutions are both local and global. Locally, for example, rules are required to protect natural defences. Rules might be about coastal development or deforestation or seeking safe infrastructure to handle sewage and wastewater. Traditional knowledge and culture have a role to play in determining the best way to build resilience.

The global solutions included the funding of infrastructure that per capita is much more expensive for a small economy than for a large economy. There has been much talk about a globally organized warning system, which after the events of the past few weeks, is something we must turn our attention to.

We also focused on the special challenges of small economies.

SIDS have expressed many common concerns, especially around lack of access to markets, and the high cost of energy, transport and communication. We know only too well in the Pacific that without regular transportation between islands, governments cannot guarantee the delivery of basic services to small communities.

SIDS aren't asking for favours: rather they are asking that the reality of their situation, their additional costs, their vulnerabilities be taken into account. No one is asking for continued dependence but for a safe way forward to self-reliance.

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We must work to identify individual problems, and then to tailor solutions accordingly. There is greater scope to recognize and provide for the differences of small island states.

And this conference has provided the forum for those realities to be heard. Too often the voices of SIDS are muffled in the bigger conferences. Compare the delegation sizes of the bigger economies going to Cancun or Doha with the one or two negotiators from a small island state.

Where small island states are no different from other states is the value they place on their people. If your people are poorly educated or unhealthy then dreams of a strong economy are going to remain only dreams.

But a small island state of 170,000 people on atolls spread over 3000 square miles of ocean cannot necessarily afford a university, a hospital that can do kidney transplants or the drugs to help HIV/AIDS patients. The USP network of satellite linked classrooms is an outstanding example of regional cooperation to offer a local solution. But again, the costs are much higher in the smaller populations and small economies of SIDS.

A rational economist might argue that the costs are too high...that the world cannot afford these vulnerable communities and small economies.

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But that would be to ignore the rich culture, philosophy, histories and learning that have evolved in these small island states. If we value economically the potential of biodiversity, then we should be applying the same economic values to human diversity.

The diverse island cultures are rich: are there to celebrate and are worth their weight in gold.

New Zealand values SIDS. We recognise the physical vulnerabilities and the fragility of a small economy.

I believe our style of work through NZAID with Pacific states is one based on mutual respect.

New Zealand believes that our neighbours know where they are heading. They have clear goals. We work within the priorities set by our neighbours. We try to work within their institutions. The Department of Education in the Solomon Islands increases its abilities by planning and executing steps towards universal school attendance. We may provide the paddles, but they power and steer the waka.

I am proud of our ability to work with our Pacific partners and with other donors, in particular Australia. It's not good enough anymore for donors to turn up on the doorstep of a small island state, offering a series of similar projects, and expect already stretched governments to cope with the administration of all of them. That's why New Zealand has taken a lead in harmonised aid delivery mechanisms in the Pacific.

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As a Minister, I am very proud of the work our Ambassador Don McKay in his chairing of the Main Committee. We are served well by our public servants.

But for all that I am proud of our style, proud that New Zealand works to understand the different issues for different Pacific states — I do recognise that we must continue to grow our aid budget. Within New Zealand, our government is committed to social justice. But Pacific voices, and tsunami experiences, tell us that social justice is global, not just local.

Thank you.