

Address by the Honourable Theophilus Ferguson John
Minister of Physical Development, Environment & Housing,
Saint Lucia at the
International Meeting to Review the Implementation
of the Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development
of Small Island Developing States
Port Louis, Mauritius, 13th January 2005

Mr. President

On behalf of the Government and People of Saint Lucia, I take this opportunity to thank all who have made this important meeting a reality. In particular, I wish to thank the Government and People of Mauritius for their warmth and hospitality, and for the superb arrangements made for the hosting of this meeting. I also take this opportunity to offer condolences to our brothers and sisters in the countries affected by the recent catastrophic events in the Indian Ocean.

Mr. President, we have come to this meeting with great expectations; expectations that we will leave, not just with fond memories of Mauritius, but also with a renewed, collective commitment to, and practical means for, continuing to address the critical development needs of Small Island Developing States.

Some would want us to adopt the view that this meeting is likely to be another talk-shop with little prospect for meaningful action. If my delegation believed that this would be the case, we would not have made the long journey here. We are of the conviction, however, that true progress can only be achieved if all parties acknowledge the true gravity and extent of the multiplicity of issues affecting Small Island Developing States and resolve to redouble their efforts to address them.

Mr. President, like many other Small Island Developing States, Saint Lucia has striven to implement the Barbados Programme of Action. Indeed, over the last decade, St. Lucia has made demonstrable progress in several areas, including Coastal and Marine Resource Management, Solid Waste Management and Energy. However this progress has been hard-won.

Since the international community agreed on the BPOA in 1994, a range of environmental, economic and socio-cultural challenges have gained prominence in the international arena. The grim spectre of HIV/AIDS and narco-trafficking are but examples.

Mr. President, many Small Island Developing States possess little in the way of exploitable mineral resources and, in a manner of

speaking, possess only a little `seawater and sand". Even that limited resource, however, is under threat from natural and human-induced hazards.

For example, Mr. President, the body of evidence that climate change is occurring continues to grow. The existence of this phenomenon and its attendant hazards, from sea level rise to more intense cyclones, is now accepted as fact by most scientists and non-scientists around the world. In this part of the world where we are now convened, and in others like my own, countries are at risk of losing much of their land resource to Sea Level Rise. In 2004, while St. Lucia was spared the ravages of hurricanes, some of our neighbours were far less fortunate. For us, therefore, to gainsay the reality of climate change is to bury one's head in the sands of denial, an approach that could lead us to the fate of a famous bird which once inhabited this beautiful island.

Mr. President, even the land resources which are not at direct or immediate risk from climate change are susceptible to other problems. Many SIDS, particularly those endowed with a more mountainous topography, have to deal with slope instability and land management. On several occasions over the last five years,

the Government of Saint Lucia has had to relocate a number of residents who have lost their houses through land slippage.

This particular problem is but one we face as we attempt to achieve sustainable land management. We are committed to this goal but are short on human and technical resources for land use planning and management.

With respect to water resources, Mr. President, many SIDS face severe constraints in their efforts to ensure a sustainable supply. In the case of my country, which relies exclusively on surface water resources, we struggle to protect watersheds while still allowing for residential, infrastructural and industrial expansion.

In the area of energy, Saint Lucia has made every effort to pursue a path of sustainable energy use. However, inadequate financing, and difficulty in accessing appropriate technologies are just two of the barriers we have faced in this regard.

Mr. President, I could go on *ad nauseum* about the challenges my country and other SIDS face in attempting to implement the Barbados Programme of Action and to meet other internationally recognized targets including the Millennium Development Goals.

However other speakers are likely to highlight a number of other challenges, and in the interest of time, I will move on.

Mr. President, we are here to review progress with respect to the implementation of the Barbados Programme of Action. And yes, there has been progress. However, as I indicated earlier, this progress has been hard earned. SIDS have had to grapple with traditional problems while confronting new ones. We have had to do so even with our well-documented constraints and vulnerabilities including inadequate human and institutional capacity and susceptibility to external factors. With regard to natural hazards, we have seen over the last few weeks the ease with which several years of progress can be erased by one major event.

While we will recognize the progress made to date and note where we have fallen short, we must also recognize the reasons why we have failed to achieve more. While it is indisputable that a state must take primary responsibility for its national development, such development can occur only within a salubrious environment and if the required human, financial and other resources are available and accessible.

For Small Island States, Mr. President, the global environment has not been very conducive and over time, has become even less so. We have seen the effects of terrorism on the global tourism industry and particularly on Small Island States. We have seen the struggle of island states to remain competitive against the backdrop of rising petroleum prices. We have also watched international assistance to Small Island Developing States decline as increasing attention has been placed on other parts of the world. Further, even that which has been made available has been increasingly targeted at "soft" projects at the expense of activities aimed at solving the actual problems on the ground.

Mr. President, SIDS have participated in good faith in international trade negotiations only to see the systematic undermining of all the mechanisms that have allowed our products to remain competitive on the world market. If the process towards trade liberalization does not sufficiently consider the needs of our small nations, it will ultimately be opening the pathway to our poverty.

If this meeting is to be successful, we must make a genuine effort to address the challenges that SIDS face in meeting their development goals. We must be committed to forging partnerships and achieving meaningful cooperation, not just utter these words as

mere platitudes. We must work together to find means to ensure that SIDS are provided with a fair chance in global arena. Further, where assistance is being provided, we need to focus not just on the diagnosis but also on the cure. Otherwise, we will be caught in a cycle of paralysis by analysis.

All that being said, Mr. President, I wish to reaffirm my country's confidence in this process. We have every expectation of successful outcome here in Mauritius.