



Opening Statement by

Ms. Fekitamoeloa Katoa ‘Utoikamanu – High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States at the

Twenty-First Meeting of the United Nations Open-Ended Informal Consultative Process on Oceans and the Law of the Sea “Sea-level rise and its impacts”

14 June 2021

Distinguished Co-Chairs,

Excellencies,

Distinguished Delegates,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

At the outset, I wish to congratulate, Ambassador Viliami Va'inga Tone, of the Kingdom of Tonga on his appointment and Ambassador Isabelle F. Picco of the Principality of Monaco on her re-appointment as the Co-Chairs of the Informal Consultative Process.

The theme of this year's ICP, "sea-level rise and its impacts" is a particularly important topic and one which the Small Island Developing States have been advocating for over three decades.

In fact, many SIDS, in particular, atoll nations are already experiencing rising sea levels and out of necessity, have been forced to deal with its impacts for several years. We have all seen the dramatic impact on nations such as Tuvalu, what it can do potentially in submerging low lying areas, you have seen how during King tides water, and it is saline water, which infiltrates through rocks and soils into the limited landmass. It not only destroys habitat; it also destroys the very limited agricultural lands through the salinization of soils.

Threatened by the rising sea levels, the Maldives has just announced the construction of a floating city to mitigate the effects of climate change and sea-level rise.

The rising sea-level is a threat multiplier that when combined with the other impacts of climate change without urgent action, will result in entire islands becoming submerged, and sovereignty, state integrity, and national identity put into question or worse, put up for grabs with all that this may imply globally. Internal displacement raises complex issues.

These are economic, social, and cultural challenges to relocated communities. But we must also take account of the difficulties the receiving communities tend to experience.

I wish to note a few of the more important issues in a setting of complex, interrelated topics, where we must be concerned with social cohesion, respect for human rights, land use and ownership, and all that they potentially entail for security and stability.

What is clear is that if this is not adequately managed, it will create additional economic, social, and cultural pressures exacerbating inequalities, exclusion, and ultimately poverty. We all know how this creates social tensions and worsens existing fault lines. Ultimately, this threatens the achievement of the sustainable development objectives.

Let us look at the profound challenges of sea-level rise on the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) of small island states.

The licensing of foreign fishing vessels in EEZs, especially where there is limited domestic capacity to exploit fisheries, brings in significant amounts of much-needed revenue.

The international legal regime that grants maritime boundaries – the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (or UNCLOS) - does not explicitly address the question of the impact of sea-level rise – and how to treat the possible resulting loss in maritime zones from land loss upon which the boundaries are initially determined.

Several SIDS have affirmed the permanency of their UNCLOS maritime boundaries including EEZs in regional agreements and national legislation.

I have said it many times throughout my tenure as High Representative and I say it again. We must step up, accelerate and streamline the support to the most vulnerable nations for climate adaptation including rising sea levels and their impacts.

So far I have mentioned SIDS but sea-level rise severely impacts the lives of millions of people living in coastal communities in the Least Developed Countries with low-lying coastal areas. Entire communities and their way of life are at threat, resulting from increasing vulnerabilities related to food security, water scarcity, loss of livelihood, potential displacement due to rising sea levels, and coastal erosion.

The COVID-19 pandemic makes the challenge even greater.

Excellencies,

I am sure we are concerned by the recent WMO report finding that the annual average global temperature will rise beyond 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels in at least one of the next five years.

Adaptation will not happen in words but action.

Allow me to highlight key areas where urgent action is required to support the most vulnerable countries to tackle the challenges from rising sea levels.

We must ensure that funding is expedited by simplifying procedures for countries with limited administrative capacity. This can be done without compromising on transparency and accountability.

I echo the Secretary General's call for 50 percent of the total share of climate finance provided by all developed countries and multilateral development banks to be allocated to adaptation and resilience in developing countries.

Enhanced international cooperation is needed and all countries can and must do more to increase investments in capacity-building and the transfer of knowledge and technology.

It is now urgent that we must enhance our global governance arrangements. We have a set of institutions and financing arrangements for action, but we must ask ourselves if they are truly responsive to and capable of addressing the challenges at hand such as the issue of the impact of sea-level rise on EEZs mentioned earlier.

Excellencies,

This week's meeting of the Informal Consultative Process provides an invaluable opportunity for the international community to come together to discuss ways to address the specific challenges of the most vulnerable countries to the impacts of sea-level rise.

I look forward to our discussions and wish you all a productive session.

Thank you.