

**21st meeting of the United Nations Open-ended Informal
Consultative Process on Oceans and the Law of the Sea**

**Opening statement of Mr. Miguel de Serpa Soares,
Under-Secretary-General for Legal Affairs
And United Nations Legal Counsel**

14 June 2021

Distinguished Co-Chairs,

Excellencies,

Distinguished Delegates,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very pleased to open on behalf of the Secretary-General, the twenty-first meeting of the United Nations Open-ended Informal Consultative Process on Oceans and the Law of the Sea.

At the outset, I wish to congratulate Ambassador Viliami Va'inga Tōnē, Permanent Representative of the Kingdom of Tonga to the United Nations on his appointment, and Ambassador Isabelle Picco, Permanent Representative of the Principality of Monaco to the United Nations, on her re-appointment as Co-Chairs of the Informal Consultative Process. I am confident that their experience and leadership will once again steer this meeting towards a productive conclusion.

Allow me to recall that the 21st meeting of the Informal Consultative Process was originally scheduled to take place last year, in June 2020. Due to the impacts of the COVID19 pandemic, the meeting was postponed. The General Assembly, in its resolution 75/239 of 31 December 2020, then decided to re-schedule the meeting from 14 to 18 June 2021, and confirmed the focus of its discussions on “Sea level rise and its impacts”.

Distinguished Delegates

Over its past twenty meetings, the Informal Consultative Process has served as an inclusive forum for discussions by a broad range of stakeholders on timely and important ocean issues, within the perspective of the three pillars of sustainable development. As specifically mandated by the General Assembly, the Process has facilitated the annual review by the General Assembly, in an effective and constructive manner, of developments in ocean affairs and the law of the sea. Other processes are likely to also have benefitted from the inclusive and broad-ranging discussions by the Informal Consultative Process, including on several topics of relevance to this year’s discussions on sea level rise and its impacts, namely the effects of climate change on oceans (2017), ocean acidification (2013) and marine renewable energies (2012).

Distinguished Delegates,

I would like to recall that, in its annual resolutions, the General Assembly has already addressed the impacts of climate change on the ocean, and the impacts of sea level rise, in a general non-sector-specific manner. On sea level rise in particular, the General Assembly has noted the findings of reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change that increasing warming amplifies the exposure of small islands, low-lying coastal areas and deltas to the risks associated with sea level rise. The Assembly has also consistently recalled that, in “The future we want”, States noted that sea level rise and coastal erosion are serious threats for many coastal regions and islands, particularly in developing countries, and in this regard called upon the international community to enhance its efforts to address these challenges.

In his report to this meeting (A/75/70), the Secretary-General highlighted that sea level rise is a global challenge affecting a significant portion of the international community, with its impacts projected to affect both present and future generations, continuing beyond 2100. Sea level rise is a threat multiplier and is projected, in combination with other climate-related ocean changes, extreme events and adverse effects from human activities on ocean and land, to have

significant environmental, economic and social ramifications. Amongst the projected impacts are the displacement of coastal communities within and across countries, and the exacerbation of existing vulnerabilities in access to water, food, health and livelihoods, all of which have the potential of fuelling of social and international conflict. Low-lying communities, including those in coral reef environments, urban atoll islands and deltas, and Arctic communities, as well as small island developing States and the least developed countries, are particularly vulnerable, with some facing threats to their very survival.

The findings of the Second Global Integrated Marine Assessment highlight that the alarming observed pace of sea level rise, combined with increasing storminess and coastal urbanization, has resulted in the amplified risks of erosion and flooding for coastal cities and communities and increased the need for substantial investments in hard infrastructure and the restoration of natural barriers, such as reefs.

More generally, the findings of the second assessment reiterate that almost all components of the ocean are impacted by climate change and human use. As a result, many of the benefits that humans derive from the ocean continue to be at risk including food safety and security, energy and resource provision, human health and well-being, coastal safety and the maintenance of ecosystem processes. This is

largely due to a failure to achieve integrated management of human activities and the cumulative effects they are placing on ocean environments.

These impacts will impede the timely and effective achievement of all the Sustainable Development Goals and may pose significant challenges for the effective implementation of other international legal and policy frameworks.

However, current frameworks and processes provide opportunities to minimize these projected impacts. If implemented in a coordinated manner, they would support integrated responses to sea level rise. It is, for example, essential to mainstream climate change considerations into ocean-related processes and vice versa, and to also to ensure that actions taken under these processes are mutually supportive and coordinated.

In addition, further integrated research, observation and assessments are necessary to better understand the impacts of sea level rise and our responses to them. Assessments of technical solutions, responses and capacity limitations must be addressed through scientific, technical and technological cooperation and collaboration. The United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development (2021–2030) will provide many opportunities to that end.

As the most affected communities in low-lying areas face significant capacity challenges in responding to the impacts of sea level rise, more international cooperation is needed to enhance and coordinate capacity-building programmes that address their need. Opportunities to use capacity-building and funding mechanisms, including climate finance, to promote both the sustainable development of oceans and seas and ocean-based adaptation and mitigation objectives could be further explored.

Distinguished Delegates,

This week's meeting of the Informal Consultative Process is an important opportunity for the international community to discuss how to enhance our ongoing work to address the dramatic impacts of sea level rise on many of our most vulnerable communities through cooperative and coordinated efforts. I wish you all to have a productive week of discussions and exchanges of information with this objective in mind.

I wish you all a successful meeting. Thank you.