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71st Session of the General Assembly

Opening remarks by H.E. Peter Thomson General Debate of the 71st session of the UN General Assembly

Heads of State and Government,
His Excellency UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon,
Honorable Ministers,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my privilege today to open the General Debate of the 71st session of the UN General Assembly.

In exercising this privilege, I am greatly humbled as a proud Fijian citizen, to know this is the first time in the seven decades of the United Nations history, that a President of the Assembly has hailed from one of the Pacific Island nations.

Your Excellencies, three hundred and sixty-one days ago, in this great hall, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was adopted. The result of two years of intense multilateral negotiations, the Agenda's adoption was like a beacon of hope raised to guide all humanity to a better world.

With its seventeen Sustainable Development Goals, the Agenda is hugely ambitious.

Imbued with a universal and transformative spirit, the Agenda sets out a masterplan for us to transform our world to one in which extreme poverty has been eliminated, and peaceful, well-governed societies live sustainably, and in harmony, with our environment.

Essentially, it provides for a future in which generations to come will live securely in a loving world.

A year has passed, and 2030 is now only fourteen years away.

How are we progressing?

Our first great indication of progress is that the Climate Change Agreement was adopted in Paris late last year, and we are moving steadily towards ratification.

I salute the Secretary-General of the United Nations for his tireless work in this area, and congratulate the Governments that have ratified the Agreement. Overcoming the challenges of climate change is the existential responsibility of our time. We must not delay any further.

It is encouraging to see that more energy is being produced from more affordable renewable sources than ever before; and more resources are going towards climate adaptation.

It is heartening to see that the numbers of people living in extreme poverty, and suffering from communicable diseases like polio and malaria, continue to fall.

It is evident the 2030 Agenda is being increasingly used as the framework for improved national development plans around the world.

But we are far from where we need to be.

Millions of people around the globe are suffering the brutal effects of war.

The crisis in Syria continues to bring immense human suffering to the Syrian people; both for those who have fled in search of sanctuary and those who have stayed under inhumane conditions.

I strongly condemn the attacks on a UN aid convey, seeking to bring desperately needed food and medical supplies to people in need. The deliberate targeting of humanitarian personnel is a flagrant violation of international law, and totally morally unacceptable.

More than 60 million people are on the move, many risking their lives to flee conflict and disaster.

Week after week, innocent people are falling victim to despicable acts of violent extremists.

The gap between rich and poor; between women and men; and between developing countries and advanced economies, remains stubbornly high.

At a time when collaboration and partnership are needed more than ever, we are witnessing rising xenophobia, divisive rhetoric, and attacks on our human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Meanwhile, global greenhouse gas emissions continue to rise; incredible damage is being done to our oceans and seas; and the window of opportunity to avert catastrophic climate change is rapidly closing.

Taken together, Your Excellencies, it is clear the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda is not yet producing the results that our world so desperately needs.

So, what are we going to do about it?

There is simply only one answer. We must do better to accelerate the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals.

We need to teach our young people about the SDGs, because for the required transformation to occur, it must first take hold in our minds and in our values. It is our children who will be the inheritors of the

Agenda's results, so every classroom around the world should be teaching the Sustainable Development Goals. I encourage you all to achieve this reality.

Greater public resources must be dedicated to achieving the SDGs, either directly through domestic finance, or through official development assistance such as climate finance.

We need to create better regulatory environments, and to require the international financial system to ensure finance is increasingly focused on productive, green and socially responsible investment.

We must support greater access for poor and marginalized communities and countries to science, technology, and innovation; to trade opportunities; and to more sustainable debt solutions.

We can and must work better on sustaining peace, on preventing and responding to conflict, and in managing the global humanitarian and refugee crisis.

Collective action by Member States must be advanced.

Strategic and inclusive partnerships must be forged to meet the global challenges we face – from climate change to conflict, from violent extremism and terrorism to the contagious diseases that threaten our kind.

As President of the General Assembly, I assure you I will do everything possible to support you in addressing these issues.

During the 71st Session, I am committed to a universal push for implementation of all 17 SDGs.

I will push for a UN development system that works seamlessly as one, and which responds effectively to the needs of Member States for which UN support is essential.

In response to the crisis our beloved Ocean is facing, I will oversee the preparations for the UN Conference on SDG 14 on Oceans, to be held here at the United Nations from 5 to 9 June next year. We are building this conference to be the game-changer for the way we ensure our Ocean's well-being, and I hope to see as many of you as possible in attendance.

Beyond the 2030 Agenda, as President of the General Assembly, I am fully conscious of the responsibilities, functions, and powers of this body under Chapter IV of the UN Charter.

Next week, I will be travelling to Colombia for the historic signing of the peace agreement between the Government and the FARC – a welcome agreement ending decades of civil conflict.

It is my hope that in collaboration with Member States and the wider UN community, it will also prove possible over coming months to take steps to advance other pressing agendas for the organization:

- To strengthen the UN’s peace and security pillar by enhancing the UN’s ability to prevent and respond to conflicts and threats;
- To advance the ‘sustaining peace’ agenda as fundamental to the UN’s engagement across peace and security, development, and human rights – there can be, after all, no sustainable development without sustainable peace;
- To combat discrimination, and to further the realization of human rights, so that all people are able to live free and equal in dignity and rights;
- To strengthen the UN’s counterterrorism architecture, and to protect the lives of the vulnerable and those most at risk of mass violations;
- To strive for greater consensus on disarmament and non-proliferation; and
- To work towards transforming the UN itself, by addressing the need for gender equality and parity, and better geographical balance; encouraging UN work practices that are flexible, innovative, and coherent; and making the UN more effective, efficient, accountable, and fit for purpose.

I take this opportunity to salute from this high podium the thousands of UN peacekeepers serving around the world, and to remember those who have made the ultimate sacrifice in service to the high ideals of this institution.

Blessed are the peacemakers.

As President of the 71st Session, I am fully committed to building on the standards of transparency and inclusiveness set by my predecessor.

This will particularly be so for the process by which the new Secretary-General will be appointed.

Thereafter, I will work to support a smooth transition and a strong start for the next Secretary-General.

I will ensure there are ample opportunities for early interaction between the new Secretary-General and Member States so as to build a solid working relationship with this Assembly.

During the 71st session, I will also seek to improve our own ways of working in the General Assembly.

I will look to address the effectiveness of General Assembly committees; improve coherence between the major Organs; enhance synergies and coherence of the Agenda, in light of the SDGs; tackle long-standing issues that are holding back the efficiency and effectiveness of the Organization; and embed greater transparency and ethics into all we do..

Of course, one area in need of particular attention is Security Council reform.

We must have a Security Council that is structured to be able to meet the new and emerging challenges of the twenty-first century. This includes tackling the security dimensions of climate change.

During the 71st Session we must work with each other – across and between traditional groups – to build trust and flexibility so that we can achieve reform that is for the common good.

Your Excellencies, in the Fijian language we have an expression ‘Rai ki liu’. It exhorts us to look ahead, not dwell on past grievances, stalemates, and mistakes.

I have touched today on some of the great challenges that lie ahead for humanity. Let us best prepare ourselves for them – ‘Rai ki liu!’.

It has been said that a politician thinks of the next election, but that a statesperson thinks of the next generation. Like never before we must look to the statesmen and stateswomen amongst us to guide us to the achievement of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, and to deliver the secure and harmonious future we all wish for our children, grandchildren, and for those that come after them.

Thank you.