

International assistance can save our people

When a fisherman in an outer island of the Maldives ventures out into the sea at dawn, and watches the sun rising out of a deep azure sea, and observes spellbound the magic of a resplendent morning in the tropics; and when our young boys joyously swim in' our crystal clear lagoons, drinking in the invigorating sea breeze to their heart's, content; and when our people, both young and old, enjoy strolling on a moonlit beach, savouring nature at its very best, it is hardly possible that any of them would ever imagine that the beauty which is theirs today could be lost to others like them at a date in the not too distant future. Nor would any of our fishermen ever think that the sea which is the bountiful source of his livelihood could, in a matter of decades, become his eternal grave. But that is precisely the prospect that we have to face today.

As we are all aware, there is a growing scientific consensus that within the next century, sea-levels will rise at a faster rate than at any time in history. Notwithstanding various scenarios that give one a sinking feeling, we in the Maldives are convinced that a universal campaign against the causes of climate change and global warming should be undertaken at once. But the Maldives is not going to be the only victim. Many other countries represented here will have to bear the brunt of the ocean's onslaught a few decades from now. And the stark truth is that no realistic solutions to our problems have yet been identified. Those recommended, even in the latest scientific literature available to us, may not be good enough. The alternatives before us can be summarised as follows: accept what is going to happen; try coastal defences; elevate the surface area of the islands; retreat inland; migrate. If not impossible, the cost of implementing any one of these solutions for most of our countries would be as unmanageable as the environment itself.

We know that when the rich countries of the North went for industrialisation in a big way, no one knew that the process would lead to environmental degradation as it has in fact done. Now we know that there must be a limit to the exploitation of the resources of the earth and its environment.

Man may have already surpassed that limit with his rapidly developing capabilities in science and technology. Atmospheric pollution, ozone depletion, global warming, climate change and sea-level rise are only the beginning. These processes have already set in motion a chain of events over which we have little control, if any, or know much about in this day of scientific enlightenment.



We still do not have the answers to the many problems we have created. But simply because we cannot find a fire- extinguisher in the house, can we allow the fire to go on? We cannot afford ignorance or complacency. Of course, we know that there is no way to determine conclusively what the future ecological balance of the Earth will be like. But can we afford to avoid corrective measures to give ourselves a guarantee that the new balance will have a niche for man in it?

Bringing the environmental message home to the Maldives with a call to mobilise international assistance, at the Small States Conference on Sea-Level Rise, Male', 16 November 1989. The Alliance of Small Islands States (AOSIS) was formed as a result of this conference.

It is time that the developed and larger nations of the world took the lead in the fight to save our planet Earth and its inhabitants. I accept that there is an increasing awareness and a stronger voice for the environment in those countries. Yet, there is little in the way of action, and a great deal of reluctance to view environmental problems in a global perspective, perhaps because the issues of development and environment also tend to question the existing world economic order. It seems that nothing short of a sensational shock can bring some sense into those locked minds. That shock could very well be the annihilation of part of the human race.

Yes! We, the low-lying small island states, are at risk today. A number of our countries will be the first to be affected by a rising sea-level, and the prospect of some island communities going beneath the waves at some future date is, according to some scenarios, quite real. It will be quite foolish of anyone to say that the process will stop there. It will not. Effective and far-reaching solutions that will stop the sea from rising must be found.

Indeed, man has always called on his ingenuity for solutions to the most harassing problems, and has succeeded. But that ingenuity is of no use if it is abused, mis-used or simply un-used. It is the will to achieve which must flavour that ingenuity. Take for example, the threat of nuclear war. It is gratifying to observe that the spectre of a nuclear winter is being dismantled step by step as a result of a radical change in international relations. The spectre of an environmental catastrophe is no less threatening. It is not too late to begin to dismantle the environmental bomb.

I stress very strongly here that, as a first step, the world community must agree to stabilise, and substantially reduce the amount of greenhouse gases released into the atmosphere due to man's activities. A sincere and wholehearted effort must be made to expedite the work done by the



The Secretary-General of the World Meteorological Organisation, Godwin D.P. Obasi addresses the Small States Conference on Sea-level Rise held in Male', 14-18 November, 1989.



President Gayoom with Shridath Ramphal, then the Commonwealth Secretary-General, who attended the Small States Conference on Sea-level Rise held in Male', 14-18 November 1989.

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, to prepare an international Convention on Environment and its protocols on restricting greenhouse gas emissions that lead to global warming.

The Maldives, Kiribati, Tonga, Tuvalu, or any other small nation in the world cannot prepare for the impending sea-level rise without substantial international assistance. It is equally true that mere rhetoric on our part will not be enough. We, the small low-lying nations of the world, need to act right now. We have to do everything within our means in planning for the future] we have to combine our resources, and implement a programme for disaster-prevention and preparedness. Above all, we have to make a vigorous and concerted effort to focus world attention on our grave predicament and mobilise a substantial degree of international assistance to save our countries and peoples.

We, in the Maldives, realising the urgent need to have a multi-sectorial, integrated programme of environmental management for the country, have recently formulated, with the assistance of the UNDP and UNEP, a National Action Plan for Environmental Management and Planning in this country. This plan recognises the need to protect and manage our immediate environment as a first step in our preparation for the predicted sea-level rise.

The global environmental issue is a matter that concerns every nation, every society, every individual. The Montreal Protocol is an apt demonstration of the ability of the world community, when it so desires, to tackle global environmental problems together. Similarly, the *Langkawi Declaration on Environment and Sustainable Development*, adopted at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting last month, was an important contribution in the efforts to effectively address environmental problems in a global perspective.

At this point, allow me to reflect briefly on the role played by the Commonwealth and in particular by Secretary-General Ramphal, on the general vulnerability of the small states of the world. This conference itself owes much to his assistance and encouragement, and to that of Australia.

Inaugurating the Cambridge Lectures on Environment, *Our common future*, in January 1989, the Secretary-General, pointed out the way in which a succession of disasters all over the world triggered intellectual awareness about the possibility of some underlying pattern of casualty. He specifically pointed out the unprecedented wave action on the Maldives in 1987, and referred to empirical evidence indicating a steady increase in the frequency of such disasters, which has brought to the awareness of political leaders that all these are not purely random events.

He also said: "Let no one dismiss this as rhetoric. The simple, and terrible, truth is that poverty and environment are inextricably linked in a chain of cause and effect. Problems of environment cannot be tackled in isolation from those national and international factors that perpetuate large-scale poverty."

Sonny Ramphal has been voicing the concerns of small states throughout. Not only with regard to the environment but also with regard to other special needs that arise out of their vulnerability in the broadest sense. Let me cite an example.

On the 3rd of November last year, a group of terrorists mounted a vicious attack on the Maldives, in the hope of overthrowing the legitimate Government of this country and gaining a base to carry out terrorist activities against a neighbouring state. This foreign armed attack threatened the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Maldives. As the struggle ensued on that woeful November day, Sonny Ramphal's voice was heard across the world, publicly over the media, and privately appealing for a quick international response in coming to the assistance of the Maldives. He monitored events closely, and did not rest until the situation was normalised with the arrival of prompt military assistance. I wish to thank the Secretary-General, once again, on behalf of the Government and the people of this country, for the crucial role he played on that eventful day, which we celebrate now as Victory Day.

This is just one example of the very special attention given to small states by Sonny Ramphal. At the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting held last month in Kuala Lumpur, handsome tributes were paid to him for his role in making the Commonwealth what it is today. I feel that we, the small states, owe much more to him.

Turning to more immediate concerns, let me say that it is time we realised that there will be enormous losses in a world of indifference. People cannot continue to pour garbage and toxins into the air, sea and land without expecting appropriate returns. These pollutants will not just be swallowed up and disappear. Though few realise it, we live in a thin membrane between space and the earth's crust which is highly sensitive to our actions.

Unfortunately, there are still sceptics who say that everything is fine, and will be fine. Their arguments, are not substantiated, and cannot be taken seriously. But we in the Maldives are very much disturbed to know that there are some conceptions of "acceptable levels" of sea-level rise, even in some reputable circles. This

notion of "acceptable levels" ignores the critical problems of the low-lying countries of the world that will face inundation and gradual destruction in the coming decade. I wonder how acceptable that is going to be to the people of those countries.

Where it is thought that it might be worth preserving some high-value land in urban cities such as Boston and New York, a report prepared for the UNEP earlier this year, states that "The Maldives Islands will have little choice: if not abandonment, sea walls¹" This predicament, so casually justified for the Maldives, and therefore for many other similar states of the world, not only reflects insensitivity but also a lack of a will to take adequate measure to protect the most vulnerable nations.

You are gathered here to discuss these problems and to try to find a way out. I know that each and every one of you will make a significant contribution to the discussions of this conference, give strength and vitality to its deliberations, and make a unified stand on the critical issues before us.

We don't want no sea-level rise.

There must be a way out. Neither the Maldives nor any small island nation wants to drown. That's for sure. Neither do we want our lands eroded, or our economies destroyed. Nor do we want to become environmental refugees either. We want to stand up and fight. All we ask is that the more affluent nations, and the international community in general, help us i