



REPUBLIC OF KIRIBATI

Small Island States Conference

The Human Dimension of Global Climate Change

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Statement by

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Check Against Delivery

Mr. Chairman,

Our host – the Government and people of the Maldives,
Distinguished delegates,
Ladies and gentlemen

At the outset allow me to convey my thanks to our host, the Government and people of the Maldives for the organization of this meeting, for the warm welcome, the kind courtesies and hospitality extended to us, and for the outstanding support that has facilitated the smooth conduct of our meeting. I want also to acknowledge here the generous support extended by the co-sponsors of the meeting – the Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation, the Centre for International Environmental Law and the Diplo Foundation.

Mr. Chairman,

It is an honour and privilege for me to represent my Government and the people of Kiribati at this important meeting. I am especially privileged, as this meeting is my first engagement since my appointment as Minister of Environment following national elections. It is also very appropriate that my first engagement is to represent my Government in the discussions of "the Human Dimension of Global Climate Change" – an issue that had been and remains at the forefront of our concerns as a Government and as a people.

Mr. Chairman,

The Maldives and, in particular, President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom is to be commended for raising the profile of Climate Change and its consequences to the international community in his address to the United Nations General Assembly twenty years ago. Since then we, as low-lying, small island states, have continued the campaign to seek a concerted collective global response to the issue. As many of us will

agree, it has been a long and arduous campaign. Along the way we have faced many challenges, the most notable being the notion advanced by some that economic growth should take precedence over environmental issues. We deplore that notion. Indeed, we find it difficult to comprehend the logic behind that notion when the quest for economic growth will threaten the very survival of some nations.

Mr. Chairman,

We do not advocate that people should be denied the right to economic development. Why should we deny people that right when we also aspire to develop economically? But we firmly believe that the blind pursuit of growth by some, regardless of its environmental cost, is fundamentally wrong. This is especially so when that pursuit will ultimately deprive others of their right to live in a safe, secure and sustainable environment.

Mr. Chairman,

The science is now irrefutable. Climate Change is a reality. So is Sea-Level Rise. And what future does that hold for us, a country comprising low-lying coral atolls?

Our make up renders us particularly vulnerable. Low-lying coral atolls which, on average are only a few hundred metres wide, do not give us much options. While we may be fortunate in that our islands are not located in the zone of cyclones, our islands are exposed to periodic strong storm surges and to droughts. The storms and droughts are becoming increasingly frequent and we are losing our coastlines to severe erosion.

Our rapidly rising population concentrated in the urban areas together with increasing environmental degradation are already putting pressure on the fragile ecosystems of our islands.

The World Bank's study on vulnerability, adaptation and the economic impact of Climate Change in the Pacific paints a bleak future for us. The study estimates that by 2050 up to 25 - 54 percent of areas in some islands, and 55 - 80 percent of villages in other islands, could become inundated.

While we are appreciative of on-going efforts led by the World Bank to develop adaptation measures to the effects of Climate Change and Sea-Level Rise in our country, we also recognize the need to seriously consider the option of relocating our peoples when necessary. How can we not when our islands will be rendered uninhabitable through the effects of Climate Change and Sea-Level Rise?

How far can we adapt? As the sea continues to rise it will increasingly intrude into our groundwater lens - our major source of water. As the sea continues to rise it will gradually erode our coastlines. Considering that our islands are narrow if we move too far inland we risk falling into either the lagoon or the ocean.

Mr. Chairman,

We endorse the proposal to advocate mitigation, adaptation, technology transfer and financing as the four key pillars in our collective efforts to focus global attention on our plight as vulnerable countries.

As a Government entrusted by our people to lead the nation we will be pursuing a policy of upskilling our people to position them for migration opportunities. Migration to those countries that are less vulnerable to the effects of Climate Change and Sea-Level Rise. As part of that policy we will also be actively seeking employment opportunities abroad for our people.

Upskilling will be the major focus of our national efforts. Provided the opportunities are available, we would expect our people to be willing and able to actively contribute to the socio-economic development of the countries they migrate to. It is in this respect that we invite members

of the international community to partner us as we embark on this new, program.

On that note, Mr. Chairman, let me express my confidence that the outcomes of this meeting will ultimately result in the mobilization of concerted collective efforts by the international community to respond to and address the adverse impact Climate Change will have on our countries and our communities. It is our fervent hope, Mr. Chairman, that the response to Climate Change will be as forthcoming, as concerted and as collective, as the international community's response to, for instance, the global war against terrorism.

Thank you.