

The war for human survival

I stand before you as a representative of an endangered people. We are told that as a result of global warming and sea level rise, my country, the Maldives, may, some time during the next century, disappear from the face of the earth. This concern may be shared by other small states represented here. I fear that this conference might be the last opportunity at this level to initiate global action that would save the Maldives and other low-lying island states from becoming environmental victims of the rising oceans.

Two decades ago, at the first United Nations Conference on the Human Environment held in Stockholm, the world was concerned with the implications of environmental degradation on human health. Pollution of the global commons such as the air, water, seas and lakes dominated the discussions. There was understandably little attention paid then to a change in the concept of economic development. However, the present environmental crisis can only be said to be the product of short-sighted economic and social policies. The progressive exploitation of the Earth's resources at such an accelerating tempo and the rapid growth in the world population have not only aggravated environmental problems, but also those of poverty, disease and economic disparity.

Even at this very moment as we meet, extensive forest areas are cleared, numerous animal species lost, the ozone layer depleted, the air, water and the sea gradually poisoned. Freshwater is becoming scarce, land for cultivation and settlement is decreasing, and desertification is taking place at a rapid pace. The social, economic and human costs of these are horrendous. We are gathered here to try and reverse these alarming trends, and to agree on how to save the Earth, the one and only planet that we have, for future generations of mankind.

In addressing this august and distinguished assembly, I should like to reflect a little on the nature of island societies, their problems and their special qualities. As long as man has faced the sea, he has wondered and dreamt of what may lie beyond the waters. The record of his achievement in crossing such barriers is found in the archaeological remains on many islands and isolated continents. Fifty thousand years ago, man successfully crossed the sea from South East Asia to New Guinea and 25,000 years ago to Australia; by about the same time, he established a population in Melanesia. The Indian Ocean people founded communities on the Maldivian Islands probably some 3,500 years before the present, while the colonization of the far flung islands of the central Pacific followed later, around 2,000 years ago. When Columbus crossed the Atlantic, a mere 500 years ago, he found the islands of the Caribbean already occupied by prosperous and healthy people.

Such long periods of occupation of our island homes have meant the development of an enormous cultural and linguistic diversity. Each island society has endowed the global community with a rich heritage of languages, religions, cultures and different ways of organizing societies in harmony with nature. Despite this vivid and varied social pattern, island societies have much in common: an abundant traditional knowledge of the sea; of stars and navigation; of fish and fisheries; of winds, tides and current; and, of boat-building, sail and rope-making.

A common basis for island societies, both then and now, is their dependence on the sea and on the rich diversity of marine resources available to support them. This reliance on the ocean reflects the limited land areas characteristic of many island groups and countries. The dynamic nature of many islands is

evident in the changes which we see between the seasons when sand is moved from one side of an island to the other; or, more dramatically, when storms form new islands and destroy others. Island societies have learnt to cope with such changes: to adapt, to move and change their behavior to suit the changing environment. Unfortunately, the balance which existed between people and their island environments has now been irrevocably changed to by the over-exploitation of natural resources and unprecedented population growth.

Health care, introduced to many islands in the last few decades, has reduced mortality, particularly among infants, and has led to rapid population growth. Aggregation of population around centers of employment and services, such as education and health, has led to high densities, often beyond the carrying capacity of the island concerned. Male', the capital city of the Maldives, for example, has a population of 58,000 on an island 1,800 meters long and 1,200 meters wide. High population densities have, of course, given rise to severe local environmental problems involving solid waste disposal, marine pollution from human effluents, coastal zone management difficulties; shortfall in supplies of construction materials, food and drinking water; and local depletion of marine resources. Technical and scientific solutions to environmental problems which have been devised for large countries and huge cities, do not work in small islands. Problems of scale, of small and fragile economies, and of limited indigenous scientific and technical expertise, all render such solutions difficult, if not impossible, to apply.

Despite the difficulties, and in keeping with the adaptable and resilient nature of island communities, the Maldives has not sat still and waited for solutions to its environmental and developmental problems to be handed to it from some external source. In addressing our own problems, in our own way, we have already taken a number of practical measures. Some years ago, we enacted legislation on the conservation of hawksbill and green turtles; and recently, submitted to parliament a draft law on environment protection and conservation on a wider scope; enforced sewage and garbage disposal standards; conducted afforestation programmes; and strengthened the institutional capacity for environmental conservation.

Because of coastal erosion, we have transferred people from four islands to better protected ones. We have banned coral mining from house reefs and reduced tariffs on building materials to preserve our coral reefs and marine ecosystem. We established a national commission for the protection of the environment in 1984; developed a national environment action plan in 1989; commenced environmental research and monitoring programmes; and combined environment and planning together in a single Ministry.

In the regional context, the Maldives has participated in wide-ranging discussion and research of environmental problems in the SAARC forums, and has been instrumental in designating 1992 as the SAARC Year of the Environment. The SAARC study on the greenhouse effect was carried out at our initiative. On the recommendation of my government to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Vancouver in 1987, a comprehensive study on climate change was carried out by a group of Commonwealth experts. To enhance further our commitment to international co-operation in the field of environmental protection, we have signed the *Vienna Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer*, the *Montreal Protocol on the Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer* and the *Basel Convention on the Control of Trans - boundary Movement of Hazardous Wastes and Their Disposal*.

Thus, the Maldives has responded to the challenge of protecting the environment in so far as it can, but international assistance in the process is greatly needed, particularly in the face of new challenges posed by



global warming and sea level rise. A 20 cm rise in sea level by the year 2030 may not sound much, but to an island nation with 80 percent of its land less than two metres above sea level, this is substantial. Up to 80 percent of the area of the smaller islands could be lost, and even the larger islands could lose 20 percent of their land area. The increase in the intensity and frequency of storms that may occur with climate change will add further to the instability of our fragile islands. The unusually high waves and swells which struck several of our islands in 1987 and the severe storms that swept across the country in 1991 were experiences quite unprecedented in our modern history. We are convinced that all our islands, including those where we have heavily invested in infrastructure such as tourist resorts, airports, fish canneries, hospitals and schools, or where our population is centered, would be extremely vulnerable to the consequences of sea level rise. Indeed, if the worst case prediction of a one-meter rise in sea level were to occur by the end of the next century, then the very survival of our islands will be threatened. We might even cease to exist as a nation.

Addressing the Earth Summit, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, at Rio de Janeiro 12 June 1992, President Gayoom spoke on the war for human survival.



The Maldives' First Lady, Madam Nasreena, with President Gayoom sign the Climate Convention at the Earth Summit, RIO de Janeiro, June 1992.



President Gayoom signing the Convention on Biological Diversity at the Earth Summit held at Rio de Janeiro in 1992.

Understandably, the people of the Maldives are deeply distressed over this alarming prospect. A petition signed by over 112,000 people, which constitutes 74 percent of our population over ten years of age, calling for international action to save the Maldives is to be presented here in Rio. We are happy that one of the developed European nations, Switzerland, has decided to join us in our endeavour to establish an international organization, the Green Crescent/Green Cross, to carry out emergency relief work in disaster situations caused by environmental degradation.

In responding to global issues of environment and development, we need to share experiences of past successes and failures among island nations and, indeed, we are pleased to note the inclusion of an islands' programme in the Oceans Chapter of Agenda 21. This recognition of the special status of small islands by the international community is particularly gratifying. To be effective, this islands' programme will need a focus within the international system to assist in mobilizing the financial and technical resources needed to tackle immediate problems of sustainable development, and to help in developing the endogenous capacity for managing our present environment and planning future developments. A small but competent scientific and technical secretariat is needed within the United Nations to provide this focus.

Agenda 21 is an ambitious document, a credit to the hard work of both the secretariat and the government delegates who have worked on its development over the last two years. To fully implement all of the proposed programmes and activities, an estimated 600 billion dollars will be needed annually. Such a sum may appear enormous, but to put this in the context of my own country, providing sea defences for only 50 of the 200 inhabited islands will cost an estimated US \$1.5 billion. In contrast, global defence spending is estimated at about one trillion dollars annually. If the world community can mobilise such extensive resources constantly for destructive purposes which set back development and destroy the global environment, then surely it must be possible to mobilise resources for more constructive purposes: to build rather than to destroy; to manage rather than to lay waste; and to unify the world community rather than to divide it.

The war for human survival, which mankind has now to wage against a common foe, is accurately described by Shridath Ramphal, when he says: "It is not a war of man against man, nation against nation, but rather a war of humanity against unsustainable living. It is the only war we can afford. Only through enlightened change can humanity hope to triumph".

This very special Summit attended by over a hundred leaders from over a 180 countries provides us with an ideal opportunity to rise to the challenge that faces us. If we allow this opportunity to slip by, it is unlikely that we will have another chance, so truly global in nature, to agree on a unified response to the overwhelming crisis of environment and development. The North and the South must work out now an effective time table for stabilising and reducing atmospheric greenhouse gas concentrations and conserving global biological diversity -goals that are vital for the ultimate good of all human beings and life on Earth. For these goals to be realised, the conventions on climate change and biodiversity must be signed by all countries. This is not to say that all the actions we need to undertake for the benefit of mankind end with the closing of this Summit. It is, in fact, merely the beginning of the UNCED process to meet the social and development needs of humankind and to protect the world's ecosystems from further fragmentation.

The unequal contribution to the development of the present ecological crisis by the rich and the poor countries, along with the fundamental differences in their respective economic capacities, has led both sides to view the problem differently. It is regretted that some nations seem to be reluctant still to go along all the way with the rest of the world to rescue the Earth and its inhabitants. I know that we have not come here to condemn one another or to blame one another for our environmental sins. But, if we really want to save the world, the rich North must assist the developing South with the necessary funds and technology that would help them to protect their countries and their peoples from the looming environmental catastrophe.

The Maldives is a very small nation and, because of that, our voice may not carry a great weight. But our voice is that of a distressed and endangered nation, as is that of Kiribati, Tuvalu and the Marshall Islands. Thus, as we debate here about conserving animal and plant species, we believe that protecting whole nations and their rich and varied heritage and culture is far more important.

Let this not be a time in the history of mankind when those who can really help decline to do so, while the very survival of the peoples of low-lying, small island nations is at stake. As I speak here today, there are 225,000 people in my country and many tens of thousands more in other small island states, expecting strong and immediate international action to save our countries.

Do not let our voice go unheard. For, if you do, it might be forever.