



Remarks

by

H.E. Mr. John W. Ashe

President of the 68th Session of the United Nations

General Assembly

Launch of the International Year of SIDS

New York

24 February 2014

Please check against delivery

President of Nauru, the Honourable Baron Waqa,
Prime Minister of Samoa, the Honourable Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi
Foreign Minister of Barbados, Maxine McClean
Major Groups Representative, Mr. Warren Chanansigh
Ambassador Ronald Jumeau
Secretary General,
Under-Secretary General Wu,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am pleased to join you at today's launch of the International Year of Small Island Developing States (SIDS).

This Year will provide SIDS with an unprecedented opportunity to celebrate their unique natural beauty and diversity, their special characteristics and their myriad contributions to the global family through their rich cultural heritage, innovative ideas and skills in sports, literature, art, music and cuisine. It will also provide both SIDS and the international community with an opportunity to address points of concern in relation to the increasing environmental degradation, social and economic marginalisation SIDS are experiencing. Most of all, just as at the start of every new calendar year provides an opportunity to celebrate and reflect, so too we must seize the opportunity for the creation of a new vision and the harnessing of fresh commitment and energy for the tasks that lie ahead. The launch of this International Year provides us all with exactly such a pivotal moment.

Almost twenty (20) years ago, the international community met in Bridgetown, Barbados in 1994 and adopted the Barbados Programme of Action (BPOA) for the Sustainable Development of SIDS. This BPOA was intended to be a sort of definitive development statement and agenda on the status, responsibilities, needs and possible strategies and solutions for SIDS. In the BPOA, however, the multilateral system recognised that SIDS faced a number of peculiar vulnerabilities and development challenges that warranted attention and had to be addressed if these small vulnerable states were to first attain and then sustain any semblance of development.

The natural beauty and biodiversity of SIDS cause SIDS to be regarded as exotic tropical paradises. Some of the very characteristics also expose these microstates to risk while underscoring their well-known vulnerabilities, including limited human resources and institutional capacities, extreme vulnerability to exogenous shocks; susceptibility to natural disasters; and extreme economic and environmental events. All of these risks lend to high income volatility while access to external capital is of critical importance to SIDS's economies and national development.

This Year takes place at a time when the vast majority of islands are combating the ravages of climate change, and some, like the Maldives are literally sinking because of it. Challenges with respect to increasing frequency and intensity of natural disasters, migration, health, job creation, trade imbalances and an inability for small enterprises to compete in the global markets, have made it very difficult for SIDS to effectively manage in the current economic climate. The international energy crisis has pushed energy prices to unaffordable levels in SIDS, which already had the highest petroleum prices in the world.

Many SIDS are now identified as water stressed and water scarce, and coastal and marine habitats are under threat thereby putting in peril the very social and economic survival of SIDS. The global financial crisis has resulted in a rise in the debt to GDP ratio and the graduation from concessionary financing of many islands, even though there has been a simultaneous shrinkage in both FDI and ODA. A quick check of the Human Development Index reveals that the development indicators for 22 out of 33 SIDS have worsened since the start of the financial crisis.

Against this background member-states agreed at the 2012 Rio+20 conference that it was timely and appropriate to turn international attention to the smallest and most vulnerable amongst our members. The relevant GA resolution calls for [quote] "actions at all levels, including through international, regional and subregional cooperation, as appropriate, aimed at the achievement of sustainable development of small island developing states." [End quote]. It is in fulfilment of those objectives and a recognition of their perilous socioeconomic circumstances that the Third International Conference on Small Island Developing States will be held in Apia, Samoa in September.

This meeting presents us with a critical opportunity to take stock of the implementation of the Barbados Plan of Action and the Mauritius Strategy of Implementation, to assess gaps and emerging challenges, and to determine how SIDS, with the support of the international community, can take forward their development agenda beyond 2015. It is an opportunity for political commitment and political will to converge and to make a positive difference in the lives of millions of people.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This International Year and the events it will foster are an opportunity to showcase what SIDS are, how they have innovated and contributed, what they have given the world, what they have to offer, and what they have achieved in spite of their limited resources. It is also an opportunity to present a very clear picture of their current needs, challenges and risks. It is a chance for the international community to inspire a deeper appreciation of SIDS and to share the many reasons why the global family of nations can and must act to support, protect, preserve and ensure the sustainable development of SIDS.

SIDS ultimately seek to achieve full sustainable development, the eradication of poverty, and gainful employment for their people. However, lasting progress will require the necessary political will, an enabling international environment, accompanied by adequate support. Equally, it will require remaining conscious of, and seeking to close the gap between promises made and promises fulfilled in a climate where ODA to SIDS is shrinking.

Following this morning's ceremony, the first meeting of the Preparatory Committee of the Conference will take place and should become a significant step on the road to Samoa. May I remind you, however, that the International Year of SIDS will continue even after the Samoa Conference has passed.

And lest we forget: the SIDS themselves have repeatedly said that they stand ready to become models of sustainability – that their small sizes and populations, well defined

problems, and the ready availability of renewable energy resources make the creation of opportunities for the building of green and sustainable solutions entirely realisable. If this approach is pursued, the Samoa Conference and indeed the International Year can result in tangible change and leave a lasting legacy.

Let us therefore commit to maintaining momentum throughout the entire year and to making 2014 a watershed year for SIDS. I will be following the events leading up to the Samoa Conference and during the Year with keen interest and I extend to you my best wishes for a transformational International Year.

Thank you.
