



**SMALL STATES
CONFERENCE ON
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THE WORLD NEEDS SMALL STATES

Speech by

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I should like to open my remarks by saying a few - I hope permissible - words about our hosts, particularly the President of the Republic, who will shortly launch the Ministerial Session of this Conference. President Gayoom and I were together a month ago in Kuala Lumpur at the Commonwealth Heads of Governments Meeting. It was an eminently successful Meeting - one of the best ever - and to its success President Gayoom and the delegation of the Maldives contributed in no small measure - a measure far larger than the size of the Maldives might suggest. That is to the credit of the Commonwealth; but it is even more to the credit of the Maldives. It makes the point that, besides being both 'beautiful' and 'vulnerable', small can also be effective. President Gayoom was effective at Kuala Lumpur. The voice of the Maldives was heard, and it was listened to with respect by a third of the world's leaders. The interests of the Maldives were advanced in the process. I salute you, Mr. President, as one of our enlightened and respected leaders.

I am no stranger to the Maldives. I was last here for our Commonwealth Finance Ministers' Meeting in 1985. It was one of the most successful in that series of meetings, a product of the unfailing hospitality and outstanding efficiency of our hosts and of this magnificent setting. These same elements will combine to ensure the success of this Ministerial Meeting - as they have already done of the Meeting of officials - a reality of competence which makes its own statement about 'small states'.

This Conference combines two themes which are of great importance for the world as we face the new century - and in both of which the Maldives has been a key player. The first is the 'vulnerability' of small states: vulnerability which, in this context, is (ofcourse) environmental, but also embraces economic and military vulnerability. Ministers from small developing states are painfully aware of the inherent weakness their countries in the face of global economic instability; of destabilisation from military adventurers; and of such problems as the encroachment of foreign fishing fleets into scarcely policed exclusive economic zones. You are aware, too, of the continuing difficulties of mobilising

resources in small, poor countries to provide even the basic infrastructure of security which a functioning nation state needs. These concerns have been well to the fore in Commonwealth deliberations in the past. They have no more articulate an exponent than President Gayoom. His current initiative in the United Nations to strengthen arrangements which will enhance the security of small states is particularly important and demands the wholehearted backing of the international community.

Over 20 years ago another Small State - Malta - raised for the first time in the United Nations the principle of the 'common heritage of mankind' in the context of the 'global commons'. The result is - many years later - the International Treaty on the Law of the Sea: a major step towards the rule of enforceable law at the global level.

The very recent resolution of the Special Political Committee of the General Assembly on the Protection and Security of Small States is another such beginning for the international community. This time, it is in the direction of collective security - a principle that must find fulfillment in the interdependent world of the 21st Century. And, again, it has come at the urging of a small state: our hosts, the Republic of the Maldives. All of you familiar with the complexities of the United Nations process will recognize the enormity of this achievement. Small States are continuing to give a lead to the world in the area of ideas. The small, it seems, can carry in their hands lanterns of enlightenment which the larger, more powerful, more advanced (as they describe themselves) nations find too heavy to bear. The world needs Small States; for much the same reason that societies need such virtues as innocence, vision, clear thinking and the courage to act in uncomplicated ways. In this matter of the Protection and Security of Small States, the Maldives with the help of most of your countries, has already rendered a great service to all countries.

Superimposed on the other difficulties which small states face there is now the prospect of major global environmental change. This is in many ways a new issue, with which the world is still trying to come to terms. As little as two

years ago the 'greenhouse effect' - and the consequential climate change and sea level rise that it threatens to produce - were on the outer fringes of the environmental debate. Scientists were divided even when they were interested; for every pundit predicting global warming there was another ridiculing the idea and another predicting global cooling; even the World Commission on Environment and Development, on which I served, was not fully seized of the problem when we published our Report in early 1987. This was the context in which President Gayoom intervened in the debate at Commonwealth Summit in Vancouver to pose the question; "had the catastrophic flooding which the Maldives had just experienced anything to do with the 'greenhouse effect'"? A week later he raised the issue in the UN General Assembly. It was his intervention at that time which more than any other factor alerted the world to the dangers of sea level rise.

The President's intervention at Vancouver and his urging that worries about the weather and the sea level should be properly analysed also led to the establishment of a Commonwealth Expert Group on Climate Change. The report of that Group was an important input into recent Commonwealth Summit at Kuala Lumpur. It has, I know, been used extensively at this meeting. Mr. Hussein Shihab, the Maldives Director of Environment - on whose shoulders has fallen the main burden of organising this meeting - was also a key member of the Group. I shall base most of my specific remarks on that Report, since it provides us with an authoritative analysis and a practical set of policy proposals.

There are many reports and studies appearing. You might ask what is there in the Commonwealth Report that is distinctive. I would stress several points. First, the Group has gone to considerable lengths, by seeking the best possible scientific advice, to present responsible predictions. You will be hearing from Dr. Warrick who was one of our main consultants - but I would say this in general terms. The figures quoted for warming and sea level rise - a sea rise of 24 to 38 cm by 2030 for example - may strike some of you as being on the low side and hedged around by caution. But that is all the scientists can tell us now with confidence. There is no value in wandering beyond certainty when even

the more modest predictions entail climate changes of a speed beyond any previous human experience, and sea flooding that will threaten disaster to many countries. There is no merit in spurious precision when the 'greenhouse effect' will produce, as Professor James Lovelock - the originator of the 'Gaia Hypothesis' - pointed out a few weeks ago, a world of "... surprises, some of which may be terrifying in human terms." Only this week, I was asked to appear on British Television in the wake of a new scientific finding that the 'greenhouse effect' may be worse than first thought; that the balancing mechanisms in place to keep climatic systems stable may be breaking down. I hope, therefore, that - at least until the Intergovernmental Panel is able to provide a more comprehensive and wide-ranging assessment - our Commonwealth Report can serve as a reasonable scientific consensus.

It also tries, in a way most other reports on the subject have not, to see the subject of climate change from the standpoint of the developing world. The group was predominantly made up of experts from developing countries reflecting the balances within the Commonwealth. Climate change will no doubt bring major changes to the developed world. But these are societies with the resources to adapt to different climate systems. The Report gives particular emphasis to the vulnerability of societies whose populations depend for their very survival on timely and adequate seasonal rainfall; or where there are millions living on delta mudbanks and other low-lying exposed areas, dicing annually with the risk of drowning. And it focused on the particular problems of small island states threatened by sea level rise. These are all societies where poverty and growing numbers are already, often, stretching the environment to the limit, and beyond; and now they have to plan to meet the cost of adjustment to climate change and sea level rise.

For many countries, climate change means a gradual shifting of the odds towards disaster. Jamaica is still suffering the long term economic fallout from last year's hurricane 'Gilbert'. Other Carribean Islands have just been devastated by hurricane 'Hugo'. Some Pacific Islands have been repeatedly struck by typhoons. Now we are being told by climatologists that a very likely consequence of global warming could be that the maximum intensity of hurricanes and typhoons will increase.

The clear conclusion of our Report is that climate change will not produce a neatly balanced outcome of winners and losers. All will have to pay the cost of adjustment. But many regions in developing countries - particularly small islands; low lying coastal areas and deltas; semi-arid, rainfed, subsistence farming areas - could face disaster. The Expert Group tried to make a contribution to understanding these processes by describing in considerable detail what climate change could mean for particular countries and especially how rising sea level would affect such countries as Bangladesh, Guyana, Kiribati, Maldives, Tonga and Tuvalu; the flooding of developed land; greater proneness to storm surges and hurricanes; threats to tourism, to public health and to food supplies. These studies are available to those who wish to look at them in detail.

In looking for solutions, the Group does not throw up its hands in despair, but produces an achievable programme of policy action described in the Commonwealth Plan of Action. The recommendations fall into three parts. The first is the need for research and information. The report shows how, at moderate cost, a comprehensive international system of climate and sea level monitoring can be undertaken to ensure that all countries are aware of what is actually happening. I trust that this meeting will be able to clarify the agenda.

A second is based on the assumption that the world will have to face some degree of climate change come what may; but, with forewarning and adequate information, individuals and societies can do a good deal to adapt. The Report emphasises that there is no justification for exaggerated or panic reaction. Evacuation of island states is a very remote option of the very last resort. Massive sea defences are also inappropriate and beyond means. The Report has sketched out how, on the other hand, small island states can sensibly plan, in the long term, to adjust to sea level rise: by diversifying their food and water supplies; adapting building standards; strengthening natural reef defences; and preparing in advance to cope with storm surges and other disasters if they occur.

In many cases these are sensible developmental initiatives that could usefully be undertaken in any event - even if the climate does not change. The essential

point, however, is the crucial importance of all governments systematically examining the assumptions underlying their long term planning to ensure it incorporates climate change and sea level rise.

A third set of recommendations relates to measures to arrest climate change by limiting greenhouse gas emissions. Here, small island states are in the invidious position for being among the major victims of man-made changes to which they have contributed virtually nothing and are unlikely ever to be more than very marginal contributors. Their future survival depends on a greater sense of responsibility by the rest of the world community. Some action is being taken as with the Montreal Protocol on CFCs which are adding to greenhouse gas concentrations as well as destroying the ozone layer (though the reluctance of some industrial countries to fund CFC substitution in developing countries is still preventing a global consensus). But the Commonwealth Report emphasizes one area for action in particular: energy conservation. The world - and particularly developed countries - are consuming fossil fuels at a rate which is inconsistent with global sustainability. Sustainability requires that emission growth be curbed to protect the global climate but also that room must be made for rapid growth in developing countries whose ascent from poverty must inevitably entail substantially higher energy use. On this let me say a particular word.

In the first millenium, our human species learned to live in harmony with the environment. In the second millenium we began to excercise dominion over the environment and in the end have massively despoiled it - mainly the industrial countries through their approaches to wealth creation. As we come to the third millennium, the environment, in a sense, is striking back - compelling us to learn the lesson that living in harmony with a life-sustaining environment is the necessary condition of human survival.

Traditionally, pollution has been seen largely as a by-product of wasteful life styles and harmful production processes in the rich world. In many respects that remains the case; eighty per cent of all commercial energy is generated in the

industrialised world, including Eastern Europe; almost all the world's chlorofluorocarbons - the CFC gases that are helping to destroy the ozone layer - originate in rich countries. The major burden of saving our planet will have to rest with those who have - often with cruel innocence - endangered it. But despite the 'greening' of politics, this month's UN Conference in the Netherlands shows how slow the major industrial countries are to learn - and how much slower to act.

Given all the environmental threats that endanger the planet and human civilisation with it, we are surely taking too long to acknowledge that we simply have to trim the edges of sovereignty and move to the rule of enforceable law world wide if we are to save ourselves. There is urgent need for bold spirits to articulate an ethic of human survival and for us to develop global responses to the challenges of today that fill out the international vision we had in 1945.

Instead, developing countries increasingly find themselves put in a position where they are responsible for global environmental problems they did little to create. The insensitivity of those who lecture you on environment but refuse to discipline (for example) their own use of cheap fuel causes inevitable resentment. 'Don't do as I do; just do as I say' is how much of this comes across. The Langkawi Declaration which the Commonwealth agreed in Kuala Lumpur suggests that the world just has to do better.

It specifically supported the findings of the Commonwealth report as a basis for 'achievable action', as well as specific efforts of low-lying and island countries 'in their efforts to protect themselves and their vulnerable natural marine ecosystems from the effects of sea level rise.'

Concretely, action must take the form of a global convention under UN auspices with the force of international law backed up by detailed protocols which ensure that greenhouse gas emissions are reduced on an agreed basis. Recent reports suggest that Preliminary negotiations - as we know - are running into trouble over the reluctance of some developed countries to accept ceilings

for CO₂ emissions and a commitment to the level of funding that will be required to develop substitutes for greenhouse gases and to enable developing countries to pursue sustainable growth. For the small states these negotiations are crucial, and this meeting must help to create a negotiating group to ensure that the particular interests of your countries are not ignored.

Finally, let me pledge the continuing support of the Commonwealth Secretariat. We are not a large organisation with large resources; but like small states, we try to do better in the area of ideas. So we shall certainly try to ensure that the particular needs of your countries continue to be given priority in terms of technical assistance and policy action in this crucial area of global environmental threats.

As sea levels rise, the world needs to help small states to manage their survival - both for small states themselves, and for the wider world that needs them.

Male', 16th November, 1989