

Implications of Climate Change on the Maintenance of International Peace and Security

20 July 2011, United Nations Security Council Chamber

Statement by President Stephen, Representing the Republic of Nauru

President Stephen: I would like to begin by thanking Germany for hosting this important debate on climate change and its implication for the maintenance of international peace and security. I have the honour to speak on behalf of the Pacific small island developing States — the region most vulnerable to climate change — namely, Fiji, the Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tuvalu, Tonga, Vanuatu and my country, the Republic of Nauru — as well as the countries of Maldives, Seychelles and Timor-Leste.

Last month, the International Energy Agency announced that in 2010 carbon dioxide emissions reached their highest level in history. Last year also tied as the hottest year on record, and the volume of Arctic sea ice dropped to its lowest level since measurements began, while catastrophic droughts, forest fires and floods wreaked havoc on countries around the world. Scientists now project that seas will rise by a metre or more by the end of the century — a level that could wipe out many small islands in the Pacific and elsewhere. All this happened despite 20 years of negotiations to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to a safe level. We must now come to terms with an unsettling reality: there is so much carbon dioxide in the atmosphere that serious impacts are now unavoidable, and we must prepare.

In my frustration, I often wonder where we would be if the roles were reversed. What if the pollution coming from our island nations was threatening the very existence of the major emitters? What would be the nature of today's debate be under those circumstances? But that is not the world that we live in, and this is not a hypothetical exercise for us. Many of our countries face the single greatest security challenge of all, that is, our survival. For that reason, we have come to the Security Council today. Because of climate change, our islands face dangerous and potentially catastrophic impacts that threaten to destabilize our societies and political institutions. Our food security, water security and public safety are already being undermined. Sea-level rise is eroding our coastlines and in some cases is damaging critical infrastructure. Loss of territory could disrupt traditional systems of land ownership and spark conflicts over land and other increasingly scarce resources. Eventually, some islands may disappear altogether, and with them thousands of years of cultural heritage. That would force large numbers of our citizens to relocate, first internally, then across borders. Even with an ambitious new agreement to address climate change, many of these impacts are now unavoidable.

The Security Council has recognized that it has a role in preventing conflict before it occurs, not just in facilitating its resolution afterwards. For that reason, it has recognized the necessity of addressing the root causes of conflict, unconventional security threats that can give rise to social tension and civil unrest, such as poverty, underdevelopment, competition over natural resources and HIV/AIDS. For such issues and others, the Security Council has evaluated the problems and, in concert with other organs of the United Nations, has deployed a variety of tools to address them. Today, we ask no less of the Council.

The international response to climate change must be comprehensive, particularly given its global nature and implications for every aspect of society. Make no mistake: the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change — the UNFCCC — is and must remain the primary forum for developing an international strategy to mitigate climate change, mobilize financial resources, and facilitate adaptation, planning and project implementation. The General Assembly must continue to address the links between climate change and sustainable development. Likewise, the Security Council has a clear role in coordinating a response to the security implications of climate change.

In the 2009 General Assembly resolution on climate change and its possible security implications (resolution 63/281), we agreed that all relevant organs of the United Nations, within their respective mandates, should intensify their efforts to address climate change, including its possible security implication. An effective international response requires disaster planning and preparedness, detailed assessments of vulnerability and risk, more effective multilateral coordination and preventive diplomacy.

In our conversations with Security Council members, we have heard loud and clear that they understand the security challenges faced by the Pacific and other island nations and that they stand in solidarity with us. However, solidarity demands more than sympathetic words demonstrated by formally recognizing that climate change is a threat to international peace and security. It is a threat as great as nuclear proliferation or terrorism, and it carries the potential to destabilize Governments and ignite conflict. Neither nuclear proliferation nor terrorism has ever led to the disappearance of an entire nation, though that is what we are confronted with today. The Security Council has also asked us what concrete steps it can take to address the issue. Allow me to tell it.

The Council should start by requesting the immediate appointment of a special representative on climate and security. That individual's primary responsibility should be to analyse the projected security impacts of climate change so that the Council and all Member States can understand what lies ahead. The Council should also request an assessment of the capacity of the United Nations system to respond to such impacts so that vulnerable countries can be assured that it is up to the task. These proposals are the absolute minimum required to move the international community from a culture of reaction to one of preparedness. As the Secretary-General concluded in his report on climate change and its possible security implications, "the international community must anticipate and prepare itself to address a number of largely unprecedented challenges posed by climate change for which existing mechanisms may prove inadequate" (see A/64/350, p.28).

Many countries have expressed concerns about the Security Council encroaching on the mandate of the General Assembly and the UNFCCC. We understand and share this concern, which is why our proposals have been narrowly tailored to address the security implications of climate change. However, we are more concerned about the physical encroachment of the rising seas on our island nations. We are deeply disappointed that there will be no formal outcome to this debate. Let history recall that once again we have sounded the alarm and the world chose not to act. The Security Council must reflect current geopolitical realities if it is to remain relevant, both in its membership and in the substance of its work. We applaud its recent decision to explore the security implications of such divergent topics as development; cultural and religious tolerance; HIV/AIDS; and women, peace and security. Yet the Council would render itself irrelevant if it chose to ignore the biggest security threat of our time. Let me be absolutely clear: The security risks of climate change are all the more reason to urgently reach a legally binding agreement under the UNFCCC.

The international community must work towards more ambitious emissions reductions from all major emitters. The current pledges are grossly inadequate and would condemn many small Pacific States, Members of the United Nations that belong to the Alliance of Small Island States, and the world to a future marked by widespread conflict and unrest. The Security Council is entrusted with the maintenance of international peace and security under the United Nations Charter. Representative of many of the world's current and aspiring Powers sit before me today. I urge them not to bury their heads in the sand and to seize this opportunity to lead. I implore them to fulfil their mandate by dealing responsibly with the security implications of climate change.