

بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِیْمِ



**Speech by  
His Excellency Mr. Maumoon Abdul Gayoom,  
President of the Republic of Maldives,  
on  
“Is There a Right to a Safe Environment”  
at the  
Royal Commonwealth Society**

*Royal Commonwealth Society, London  
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*Mr. Mole, Director General of the Royal Commonwealth Society,  
Distinguished Attendees, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen:*

Thank you for the introduction. You have just given a brief outline of my work and what I am going to speak about today.

Today’s Commonwealth of 53 sovereign nation-states is a progressive and respected voice; a committed advocate of international peace, democracy, and sustainable development; and a dynamic forum for exchanging ideas on issues of global importance.

We in the Maldives value our membership in the Commonwealth.

I am sure you are aware that our nation is engaged in a period of profound and unprecedented change. With our wide-ranging reform agenda, we aim to complement our economic success story with social and political transformation. With great change comes great challenges. The Commonwealth remains a consistent and reliable friend in this process; a valued source of technical assistance; and a vital political forum for bringing our concerns to the international stage.

I can, therefore, assure you that when the Royal Commonwealth Society speaks to promote the Commonwealth, Maldivians will raise their voices in solid support.

I have come here today to speak on an issue of profound importance, an issue that has concerned me for more than 20 years. I am here to speak about global climate change - unquestionably the most daunting challenge facing the world today, demanding a very serious, urgent, and comprehensive response from the whole community of nations.

*Ladies and Gentlemen:*

This November's Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Kampala will mark the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first discussion of climate change by Commonwealth leaders. In 1987 in Vancouver, I had described how unprecedented waves had caused widespread destruction in the Maldives, a statement which later found an eerie echo in the suffering caused in my country by the 2004

tsunami. Following my speech, then, Heads of Government “expressed serious concern at the possible implications of man-made climate change, especially for low-lying and marginal agricultural areas” and asked the Secretary General to look into the issue. Thus, the Commonwealth became one of the first international bodies to discuss and take action on the issue of global warming.

A few days later, in New York, I made a statement at the United Nations General Assembly in which I warned the world about the growing threat to the planet posed by climate change and associated rises in mean sea levels. This was the first time that the issue of climate change was raised before world leaders at the UN. In that statement I informed delegates, in no uncertain terms, that a failure to act to stave off the threat of climate change would result in the death of my country and many like it.

Two years later, in November 1989, the Maldives hosted the first ever Small States Conference on Sea-Level Rise. The outcome was the Male’ Declaration on Global Warming and Sea-Level Rise which paved the way for the eventual establishment of the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS). The Male’ Declaration also called for the early establishment of a framework convention on climate change.

When the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) was subsequently adopted at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, AOSIS played a key role in the preceding negotiations. When the subsequent Kyoto Protocol was finalised in 1997, the Maldives was the first country in the world to sign, and along with other Small Island States, was among the first to ratify it.

In retrospect, these were momentous times. Rio was the largest ever gathering of world leaders. During the past 15 years we have worked hard to deliver on the promise of Rio, in places like Kyoto, Johannesburg, Montreal and, most recently, in Nairobi. Each successive location brought new expectations, new urgency but, ultimately, new disappointments.

For these were also times of failed promises and missed opportunities. Despite the Rio Declaration and the agreement on a Framework Convention and the Kyoto Protocol, global greenhouse gas emissions seem set to rise by 50% between now and 2030.

*Ladies and Gentlemen:*

Today, as I look back on my speeches in international fora of twenty years ago, I would like nothing more than to be able to stand here and tell you that I was wrong; that our concern was misguided or exaggerated. However, I have to say that if anything, I may have then underestimated the impact climate change would have on our societies. The science in 1987 was already compelling, serious and demanding of a response. But, the science then did not anticipate the global increase in greenhouse gas emissions that would take place throughout the 1990s and early 21<sup>st</sup> century, nor did it predict the part emerging economies such as China and India would play in that increase.

Today, as I reflect on 20 years of political advocacy and action, I wish I could report that the job has been done, that emissions are under control, that catastrophic climate change has been averted. However, as we all know, the threat now is greater than ever, the sense of urgency is more acute than ever, and thus the need for decisive action now is more immediate than ever before.

James MacNeill, who was both Secretary General of the World Commission on Environment and Development and the principal author of *Our Common Future*, once said "perhaps the greatest weakness of sustainable development lies in the fact that we have not yet begun to invent a politics to go with the concept". Today, I tell you that the greatest tragedy of climate change is that we have not yet invented a politics to respond to the warnings of our scientists.

*Ladies and Gentlemen:*

Climate change, sea level rise and their related effects are, to the Maldivian people, a reality encountered right now in their daily lives. Our beaches are eroding at a rate previously never witnessed. More frequent El Niños pose immense risk to the health of our network of coral reef. Our fresh water lenses are being polluted with salty water. Stormy weather is now more frequent and intense.

All these effects leave no room for speculation; climate change is a clear and present danger, and the Maldivian people need a solution urgently.

The sheer vulnerability of our archipelago has been shown in no uncertain terms in recent times. The 2004 tsunami left in its wake death, destruction and despair.

In recent months, our efforts to fully recover from the devastation of the tsunami have suffered a new blow. While stormy weather and seasonal tidal surges are a common occurrence in the Maldives, this year, we are faced with surges on an unprecedented scale. Never in our documented history has so many islands been flooded over simultaneously and to such an extent.

While the Government has rushed help to those affected by this flooding, and appealed for international assistance, this latest calamity is yet another striking reminder that the beautiful Maldives and its people need protection from the elements. This is not a task that my Government can undertake alone. We need your support!

*Ladies and Gentlemen:*

Despite the disappointments that I referred to earlier, I stand before you today with a message of hope. I believe that the landscape is slowly changing. I believe that the argument is gradually being won. And for the first time, I believe that the tide is in our favour and it is leading us in the direction of a new international consensus, not only on the science of climate change, but on the type of measures that are needed to bring us back from the edge. Now, as twenty years ago, the Commonwealth and its members have a vital role to play in turning these positive trends into concrete action.

When accepting last year's Nobel peace prize, Muhammed Yunis - Founder of Grameen Bank in Bangladesh, said of his work in pioneering microfinance for the poor "Previously, if we screamed, people didn't listen. Now, if we whisper, the whole world will hear".

Listen closely today and you will hear the words climate change being whispered by people all across the world and as a result, serious political momentum is now building. Al Gore's movie, *An Inconvenient Truth*, and last week's global Live Earth concerts – including one which took place in the Maldives - have done much to turn the tide of public opinion.

The publication of the Stern Review by the eminent former World Bank economist Sir Nicholas Stern did much to argue the economic case for climate change action. The report is clear that unchecked climate change would trigger a global recession of enormous proportions, turn 200 million people into refugees, and precipitate the largest migration in modern history, as their homes succumbed to drought or flood. Our actions over the coming few decades could create risks of major disruption to economic and social activity, later in this century and in the next, on a scale similar to those associated with the great wars and the economic depression of the first half of the 20th century.

The three reports by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) have established a clear scientific consensus. Global warming is "unequivocal", as is now evident from observations of increases in global average air temperature, widespread melting of

snow and ice, and rising global mean sea level. The IPCC also leaves us in no doubt as to the principal cause of climate change stating that “most of the observed increase in globally averaged temperatures since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century is very likely due to the observed increase in human induced greenhouse gas concentrations”.

Consequently, there is now a real sense of international momentum leading towards the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change Conference in Bali, Indonesia, scheduled for the 3<sup>rd</sup> to the 14<sup>th</sup> of December this year. This meeting is already being described as a potential turning point in our bid to reach breakthroughs on climate change mitigation and adaptation, and as a significant opportunity to develop a comprehensive post 2012 agreement to the controversial and limited Kyoto Protocol.

Reaching agreement in Bali will not be easy. The discussions will certainly focus on mitigation, adaptation and responsibility. Various instruments from emission caps and technology to carbon offsets and deforestations will be raised. Some countries will continue to question the science. Others will be resistant to any measures that seem to constrain their short-term economic growth.

The challenge facing the Maldives, other Small Island Developing States and the Commonwealth is to engage with this process with renewed commitment, to develop a set of proposals to bring before the international community, and to maintain the pressure for a comprehensive agreement on tackling climate change.

We all have a constructive role to play in Bali. We in the Maldives are committed to a comprehensive mitigation regime at the global level. We have already developed a substantial programme of adaptation, involving the safeguarding of vital services and infrastructure, awareness-raising amongst the population, the development of flood defences, and the safe island concept that offers voluntary relocation to island communities who feel threatened by rising sea levels. This is a highly ambitious programme, which requires great investment of domestic resources.

*Ladies and Gentlemen:*

In addition to these important steps, it is my firm belief that we also need to bring greater creativity and innovation to the global discourse on climate change. The newly confirmed scientific consensus on global warming means that as we look towards Bali; the major challenge facing us is one of ideas. This battle of ideas will naturally cover how the world should respond to the threat of climate change.

Therefore, the Government of the Maldives proposes to supplement the traditional architecture on global warming with a new initiative on human rights and the environment.

The idea of “environmental human rights” is not a new one. Many international agreements since the 1972 UN Stockholm Conference have talked about it, while over one hundred nations have constitutional provisions intended to enshrine the right.

As the Stockholm Convention declared:

*“Both aspects of man’s environment, the natural and the man-made, are essential to his well-being and to the enjoyment of basic human rights – even the right to life itself”*

Unfortunately, the growing international interest in environmental human rights has thus far only extended to addressing the impact of environmental degradation on existing civil and political rights such as the right to life, and on existing economic and social rights, such as the right to food or to clean water. Little substantive progress has been made towards the next logical step in this evolution: to formulate and declare an explicit right to live in a safe and sustainable environment.

With this in mind, the Government of the Maldives is looking at ways, as we approach the Bali meeting in December, to raise the issue of environmental human rights, and to discuss how such rights might be applied to the issue of climate change and its consequences - particularly its consequences for the inhabitants of Small Island States, who make only a tiny contribution to global warming, yet who stand to suffer the most. We hope that such an exchange of ideas will provide useful food for thought for world leaders as they approach the Bali Conference.

*Ladies and Gentlemen:*

In 2007 climate change represents a vital political, social and economic challenge to us all. To Small Island States, climate change is nothing short of an existential crisis.

Let us today resolve to inject new momentum into this cause. Let us resolve to work together as a global community in 2007 to finish the job we began 20 years ago.

Let us say enough of expectation and promises – it is time to deliver. Enough of hesitation, it is now time for bold leadership.

In 1987 the Maldives provided leadership on this most important of issues. 20 years later, we step forward once again. We hope the Commonwealth will step forward with us.

*Thank you.*