



Statement of

**THE HONOURABLE REV. DR. POHIVA TU'ONETOA
PRIME MINISTER**

of the

KINGDOM of TONGA

**on the occasion of the
General Debate**

**at the Seventy-sixth Session
of the United Nations General Assembly
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Pre-recorded Statement
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Check Against Delivery

Mr. President,

It's been over a year and a half from when the COVID-19 was declared a pandemic, disrupting the ebb and flow of economies and social infrastructures world-wide. But it is by God's grace that the Kingdom of Tonga remains COVID-19 free. And while so many lives have been claimed in the wake of this pandemic, Tonga, now more than ever, commits to multilateralism thereby supporting the theme for this session, aptly introduced by Your Excellency as President of the General Assembly for the 76th session entitled "*Building resilience through hope – to recover from COVID-19, rebuild sustainably, respond to the needs of the planet, respect the rights of people, and revitalise the United Nations*".

On that note, I congratulate Your Excellency on the assumption of your presidency at the 76th session of the United Nations General Assembly and assure you of our delegation's full support throughout this session. I express our gratitude to your predecessor, His Excellency Mr. Volkan Bozkir in successfully spearheading the 75th session of the General Assembly during unprecedented and most difficult times.

I congratulate His Excellency Mr. António Guterres on his re-appointment as Secretary General of the United Nations to a second term and commend his leadership in safely navigating the operations of the United Nations under the undesirable circumstances of the pandemic.

Mr. President,

I express sincere condolences and solidarity with all Member States afflicted in the loss of lives due to the pandemic while confronted by unprecedented natural disasters and other tragedies. While Tonga remains COVID-19 free, we have not been spared from the socio-economic consequences thereof, worsened by an already dire economic situation facing many Small Island Developing States (SIDS).

Tonga is fortunate to be the third country in the Pacific to receive the COVID-19 vaccine doses in March 2021 through the COVAX Facility. To date, approximately one third of the population have been vaccinated and Tonga aims to vaccinate up to 70 percent of the population by end of 2022.

Accordingly, Tonga joins other leaders in calling for timely and equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines while supporting a WTO TRIPS waiver for COVID-19 vaccines. Tonga supports to strengthen regional and global early pandemic and disaster planning and resilience building efforts.

I express sincere gratitude to all development partners, including the governments of New Zealand, Australia, China, Japan, United States of America, India, United Arab Emirates, to name but a few, and international organizations including the World Health Organization, UNICEF, CEPI, Asian Development Bank and the World Bank for their most generous financial and humanitarian assistance, through the COVAX Facility from which Tonga has received more than 70,000 doses in addition to logistic and other support which have aptly facilitated Tonga's response to remain vigilant amidst this global pandemic.

Mr. President,

In light of the continued situation of the COVID-19, the fourth session of the Intergovernmental Conference on the Conservation and Sustainable use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction has been further postponed to the earliest possible available date in 2022. The progress of BBNJ intersessional work through dialogue on relevant topics is well underway thereby keeping the momentum in this important process. Tonga is grateful for the commitment by the International Seabed Authority (ISA) to further building the capacity of developing States especially through the recent workshop of the Abyssal Initiative project which was jointly organized by the ISA and the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) in July 2021 in collaboration with the Cook Islands, who hosted the workshop, and with the support of the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD). Tonga looks forward to hosting the final workshop of the Abyssal Initiative project later this year.

Mr. President,

Tonga along with other leaders of the Pacific Islands Forum, at its Fifty-First Forum Leaders' meeting, recently held on 6 August 2021, once again reaffirm that Climate Change is the single greatest threat facing the Blue Pacific while recommitting to the goals enshrined in the Paris Agreement. Tonga is one of the most vulnerable countries in the world to climate change due to geographical and economic factors. It has been ranked by the World Risk Report 2017 as the second most at-risk country in the world to natural disasters such as cyclones, flooding and sea level rise.

While Tonga contributes to a negligible amount to global greenhouse gas emissions, we are nonetheless ambitious in supporting the goal of limiting global warming through the submission of our second Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) in 2020 in line with the timeline agreed to under the Paris Agreement. Tonga also launched the Tonga Energy Efficiency Master Plan (TEEMP for 2020 – 2030) and the National Certificate on Sustainable Energy (NCSE) which is a clear testament of our determination to achieving a sustainable energy future while mitigating the effects of climate change.

Mr. President,

Tonga had the honour of co-chairing the Twenty-first meeting of the United Nations Open-ended Informal Consultative Process on Oceans and the Law of the Sea (ICP21) with the Principality of Monaco from 14 to 18 June 2021, focusing its discussions on "*Sea level rise and its impacts*". The discussions on this very critical and timely topic for Tonga and the Pacific brought to the fore the need for accelerated actions to slow the rate of increase in sea level rise.

Speaking of sea level rise, our Pacific Islands Forum leaders continue to note with grave concern the threat posed by sea level rise to our Blue Pacific and are committed to ensuring that maritime zones of Pacific Member States are delineated in accordance with the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) which should not be challenged or reduced due to climate change related sea level rise. At their Fifty-First meeting on 6

August 2021, the Pacific Islands Forum leaders supported the development of a draft Declaration on Preserving Maritime Zones in the face of Climate Change-related Sea-level rise.

The Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) provides the “...*most up-to-date physical understanding of the climate system and climate change...*” (AR6 Climate Change 2021, IPCC Report) for which it made a clarion call in their comprehensive assessment report on the Ocean and the Cryosphere for urgent action to prioritize adaptation and mitigation measures. The 2021 IPCC Report alluded to “*global-mean sea level keeps rising even in the lowest scenarios*” of low emissions. However, should countries fail to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, presenting a high emissions scenario, it is highly likely that this will result in an increase on average of sea level - five times that in low emissions, and such is not an option specifically for Tonga and low-lying small island States in the Pacific and the rest of the world.

The Pacific region, because of its peculiar setting of low-lying small island States and atoll, is unfortunately experiencing sea level rise at a faster and in more extensive form than others, to which are most vulnerable to sea level rise. Accordingly, the adaptation period that is required for low lying coasts such as Tonga and the Pacific region will require a shorter time to prepare than others. The impacts of which are set to hinder the progress of achieving Sustainable Development Goals and the 2030 Agenda.

Mr. President,

Achieving the crucial goal of limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius is a moral obligation of each country, whereby the aggregated individual country NDC efforts would help in reducing national emissions while adapting to the impacts of climate change.

Thus, Tonga calls on major emitters around the globe to urgently commit to stronger climate action through robust strategies developed to achieving a net zero carbon by 2050. The commitments already made by leading countries to curb greenhouse gas emissions are most welcome and held in high regard. We look forward to participating in the 26th United Nations Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP 26) in Glasgow, United Kingdom, from 31 October to 12 November 2021 with the view to accelerating actions towards achieving goals of the Paris Agreement.

Mr. President,

The Secretary-General’s report on developments and issues relating to ocean affairs and the law of the sea aptly addresses the continued importance of the “blue economy”. The sustainable use of the ocean resources, and preserving the health of ocean ecosystems, are critical, given the strong linkages between the people of the Pacific region and the ocean for which they rely upon for their livelihood. The declining health of the oceans due to the considerable amount of living coral lost, overfishing, growing number of ocean acidification and insurmountable problem of marine plastic pollution poses great risks to our food security, livelihoods, and the environment, for which is deeply felt in this way by low-lying coastal States and small island developing States such as Tonga.

It is therefore urgent for us to call on others to assist in this endeavour of reversing the declining trend affecting the ocean as our traditional provider. Urgent actions are needed on the achievement of ocean-related Sustainable Development Goals and the implementation of the SIDS Accelerated Modalities of Action (SAMOA) Pathway. This is becoming more evident in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic specifically for SIDS.

While much have been done to address the plight of the oceans and pertinent issues raised in respective reports, our delegation would like to stress the need for urgent actions to addressing sustainable livelihoods while upholding the legal framework as set out under UNCLOS.

Mr. President,

It is very disheartening to see how the global pandemic, now entering the second year, has caused major disruptions in the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. We acknowledge the comprehensive Sustainable Development Goals Report 2021 prepared by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) in collaboration with other international agencies.

On that note, we are grateful for the positive engagements thus far with the United Nations Office of the High Representative for Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing countries and Small Island Developing States, the World Health Organization, the United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs; the UNDP, the UNESCAP, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the United Nations Resident Coordinator in the Pacific, Non-Government Organizations, Civil Society Organizations, and Development Partners.

I acknowledge with gratitude the successful completion of the term of employment for Mrs. Fekitamoeloa Katoa 'Utoikamanu as Under-Secretary-General and High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing countries and Small Island Developing States. The opportunity afforded to one of our very own from Tonga and the Pacific considering the underrepresentation of our country and the Pacific at the higher echelon of the United Nations is deeply valued. We look forward to receiving more recognition and inclusion of people from the Pacific in the executive tiers of the United Nations systems in future.

Mr. President,

I conclude by reaffirming our commitment to sustainable development and resilience through multilateralism. Recognizing the urgent call for action in response to nature and the environment while being mindful of what humankind so deserve. And with hope and determination, a more secure and durable future is envisaged through creative partnership and peaceful cooperation.

I thank you.