



SOLOMON ISLANDS

STATEMENT BY

HONOURABLE MANASSEH DAMUKANA SOGAVARE
PRIME MINISTER

AT THE OPENING DEBATE OF THE SEVENTY SIXTH SESSION OF
THE UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY

25 SEPTEMBER 2021

Mr. President,

Excellencies,

Distinguished delegates,

On behalf of the Government and people of Solomon Islands, let me take this opportunity to congratulate your Excellency Mr. Abdulla Shahid and the government and people of Maldives on your election as President of the 76th Session of the United Nations General Assembly. I am confident that through your able leadership, you will proficiently lead us through our agenda and serve this organization well. I assure you as a fellow Small Islands Developing State, of Solomon Islands' support and cooperation during your tenure in office.

On this note, I must also commend your predecessor, His Excellency Mr. Volkan Bozkir, for his sterling leadership of the General Assembly over the past session. I highly commend his efforts in ensuring the work of the assembly progressed despite the challenges faced by the United Nations Secretariat and member states' missions. I wish him every success in his future endeavors.

Let me also use this occasion to extend my congratulations on behalf of the government and people of Solomon Islands to His Excellency Mr. Antonio Guterres on his re-appointment as the United Nations Secretary General. The United Nations is confronted with many

challenges including the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change and sea level rise and peace and security to name a few.

Tackling these global challenges effectively calls for a strong multilateral system of genuine and durable partnerships and cooperation between countries.

Allow me to assure you Secretary General Guterres of Solomon Islands support and cooperation as you endeavor to lead this august body to address the important issues and challenges that confront our nations and which we must all work together to address.

Mr. President,

The theme for the 76th Session of the UNGA - "**Building resilience through hope - to recover from COVID-19, rebuild sustainability, respond to the needs of the planet, respect the rights of people, and revitalize the United Nations**" aptly summarizes the challenges facing our world today and the collective hope that we all share to overcome these challenges.

At the outset, I offer my sincerest condolences on behalf of the government and people of Solomon Islands to all who have lost loved ones to the coronavirus. We stand in solidarity with you all in the face of adversity during these unprecedented times.

Eighteen months after the global COVID-19 pandemic was declared, the battle against this contagious disease has never been more important, complex, and challenging. More than 216 million people

worldwide have been infected by this virus. More than 4.7 million people sadly died from the virus.

While science has given us a breathing space through vaccines, several contagious and more lethal variants of the disease including the delta variant are causing new waves of infection in many countries around the world.

Concerted collective action by all UN members using all forms of partnerships bilaterally and multilaterally is needed now, more than ever, to help us to collectively address the challenges all our countries are facing today.

Mr. President,

Solomon Islands has so far successfully controlled the spread of the virus. To date, we have recorded 20 imported COVID19 cases on our shores. We have managed to eliminate the infections in our border quarantine facilities. I am pleased to announce we have not had an active case of COVID -19 for the last five months.

My government is delivering on its two overarching policy objectives during these trying times which are (i) to protect all Solomon Islanders and other nationals living in the country against the COVID-19 virus, and (ii) to drive and keep the country's economy afloat. We are achieving these two objectives.

Mr. President,

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted gaps in our health system and overall response capacities. My government is addressing this and has put in place measures to secure our borders. We have expanded our COVID-19 testing capability. The pandemic has enabled us to improve our health system and healthcare facilities throughout the country.

On this note, I express my government's sincere gratitude to our development partners that have assisted us in our response to the COVID-19 pandemic. I thank all donors and partners to the COVAX Facility. I thank the governments of Australia, Indonesia, Japan, New Zealand, and the People's Republic of China. I also thank the Asian Development Bank, the World Bank, the United Nations agencies and in particular, United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund and the World Health Organization, and our regional institutions for their kind assistance and support. Your support ranging from direct financial contribution to the provision of vaccines, equipment, medical and other operational equipment, and supplies has enabled my government to protect our people thus far from COVID-19. Your unwavering support is deeply appreciated and will continue to be needed as we go forward.

Vaccination is our best defense against the virus. We associate with the voice of reason that 'no one is safe until everyone is safe'. Cooperation in combating COVID-19 must be based on the unity and solidarity. The world must act together to combat COVID-19. We

cannot afford to be divided in our approaches. We look forward to working with all our partners going forward.

Our vaccination rollout program is moving in the right direction although not as fast as we want it to be. We have set ourselves a target of at least 90% fully vaccinated coverage of our eligible population before we consider re-opening our borders.

Mr. President,

Providing accurate information regularly about the disease and the progress in combating it has enabled our public to be better prepared and participate in our fight against COVID-19. We keep our public informed through talk back shows and my regular public address to the nation which is broadcasted live on air and televised.

In the long term, the Government is in the process of finalizing its Public Health Bill that will provide a legislative framework to effectively respond to any Health crisis that may face the country in future. On that note, I commend and thank our very hardworking healthcare workers and all our frontline agencies who had worked tirelessly to protect our nation against this deadly disease. Your sacrifice and dedication are greatly appreciated.

Mr. President,

The negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on our economy had been significant. By mid-2021 our balance of trade deficit was around \$96 million; \$24 million higher than the previous month. This is a substantial amount for our small economy. This negative outcome

stemmed from a larger fall in exports by 13% against a marginal decline in imports by 1%. Restrictions on international travel into the country has also impacted heavily on the tourism industry forcing tourism operators to drastically scale down their operations.

To keep the economy afloat my government introduced immediate recovery measures. We implemented 'economic stimulus packages' to drive the productive sectors. We launched our 'Umi Tugeda tourism' initiative. We drove several transformational and 'game changing' national projects to boost the economy and provide employment opportunities for our people as we try to stabilize our economy.

The Pacific Labour Scheme Solomon Islands has with Australia, New Zealand and Canada has provided needed employment for many of our youths. We have reached new heights in our partnership with Australia in labour mobility for which we are thankful. These partnerships put human faces to our relationships with Australia, New Zealand, Canada in the labour mobility front. They contribute to our economic recovery efforts.

Mr. President,

As a Small Islands Developing State, Solomon Islands continues to battle with the incremental effects of climate change and its negative impacts that threaten the livelihoods, security, and wellbeing of our people. The Pacific Island countries and territories have identified

Climate Change as the ‘single greatest threat’ to our people and to the planet. It is a global issue that needs a global solution.

We remain deeply concerned that we are falling behind in our commitments under the Paris Agreement. Already global the temperature has increased above pre-industrial level to 1.1 Celsius degrees. The most recent Report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change delivered the starkest warning yet about the deepening climate emergency.

The IPCC Report further stated that limiting global warming to close to 1.5 degrees Celsius or even 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels “will be beyond reach” in the next two decades, without immediate, rapid, and large-scale reductions in greenhouse gas emissions.

We strongly call on all major greenhouse gas emitting countries to cut emissions and take more ambitious action place the world on a ‘below 1.5 degrees Celsius pathway’.

Sadly, the current trend is driving humanity towards a ‘three degrees Celsius world’ which we can all agree is not world we wish to bequeath to our future generations.

COP26 in Glasgow to be held in November this year, presents an opportunity for the world to operationalize the Paris Agreement, and conclude negotiations on the Paris Rulebook.

Establishment of, common time frame for Nationally Determined Contributions is needed. Markets and non-market negotiations need

to be concluded and Loss and Damage solutions to be operationalized.

Further support is needed for the Warsaw Mechanism and an Adaptation Fund should serve and support the Paris Agreement. The time for action is now.

Mr. President,

Solomon Islands is a large ocean state. Its' total Exclusive Economic Zone covers an area of just over 1.5 million square kilometers. Together with 21 other countries and territories our total EEZ is almost 40 million square kilometers of Ocean.

The Solomon Islands tuna industry generates around \$60 million in revenue on an annual basis and provides employment for *2,000 Solomon Islanders*. Our people have a multidimensional relationship with the ocean. We recognize the climate–ocean nexus and call on the global community take stronger climate action to protect our oceans.

The devastating impact of plastic pollution on our fragile marine ecosystems demands a global binding agreement to reduce plastic pollution in our oceans. We support the establishment of such an Agreement.

As an ocean locked state, Solomon Islands remains committed to negotiating a legally binding instrument on the conservation and sustainable use of marine biological diversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.

My government looks forward to an Agreement that is fair, comprehensive and one that provides capacity building for small island developing states such as Solomon Islands to fully implement. We must strive to complete these negotiations as soon as possible.

Protecting the sovereignty of Solomon Islands' maritime zones remains important priority of my government. We continue to work towards the completion of the delimitation of all our maritime zones in accordance with the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.

In this regard, my government supports the ongoing work that is being undertaken by the International Law Commission on the question of sea level rise and sovereignty. It is my government's unwavering position that once national maritime zones are deposited with the United Nations, they should never be challenged. Rights must be respected irrespective of sea level rise. This proposal preserves the principles of equity, fairness and justice of the Convention and recognizes UNCLOS principles of legal stability, security, certainty, and predictability.

Twelve years ago, Solomon Islands submitted four continental shelf claims with the UN Commission on the Limits on Continental Shelf. Once considered these claims will further expand Solomon Islands sovereignty. We look forward to working with the Commission to finalize consideration on the stated claims.

Mr. President,

Solomon Islands is a party to the 1985 the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty, we therefore would like to keep our region nuclear free and put the region's nuclear legacy behind us. The ocean remains the life blood for our survival and would like to work with everyone in keeping it blue and healthy.

The United Nations was established out of the ashes of World War II. As a peace-loving state, Solomon Islands will do its part to build bridges of cooperation and highways of friendship and partnership in our region and beyond. Solomon Islands is committed ensuring the Pacific region remains a peaceful region where its people can live free and worthwhile lives. We do not support any form of militarization in our region that could threaten regional and international peace and stability.

Mr. President,

Solomon Islands is in its transition phase of graduating from the Least Developing Countries category and is scheduled to graduate by 2024. In preparing for our graduation, we have so far concluded several regional and bilateral trade agreements within the Pacific, with the European and the United Kingdom of Great Britain. We have a non-reciprocal trade arrangement with China.

However, with the impact of COVID-19, an in-depth analysis on the health of the Solomon Islands economy will need to be done. We hope to complete this before the next the triennial review. It is the view of

my government that the date of graduation should be delayed due to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic the least developing countries.

I take this opportunity to call on our development partners to also align their support and priority programs with the Solomon Islands National Development Strategy to assist Solomon Islands achieve our development objectives.

Mr. President,

On UN reform, Solomon Islands aligns with call from countries for a reform in one of the principal organs of the UN that is responsible for the maintenance of international peace and security – the UN Security Council.

The UN Security Council will need to adapt to today's realities and support an expanded Council with a SIDS-dedicated seat. It has been sixteen years since world leaders called for early reform of the Council, we hope negotiations could shift into text-based negotiations at this session.

Mr. President,

Solomon Islands recognizes the importance of Human Rights and subscribe to the principles of UN Charter and believes genuine partnership can further promote and protect the rights of all.

Solomon Islands supports the role of the Human Rights Council and the Universal Periodic Review mechanisms as a platform through

which countries can engage in mutual dialogue on human rights concerns.

Furthermore, I am pleased to inform this Assembly that Solomon Islands has presented its National Report for the third cycle of the Universal Periodic Review. Through this report Solomon Islands reiterated its commitment to strengthening its human rights mechanisms including through the establishment of national human rights reporting mechanism that would allow for the timely submission of human rights reports.

Solomon Islands is also committed to ratifying UNCRC Optional Protocol on the sale of children, child prostitution, child pornography, and several other Human Rights Conventions.

On the domestic front, Solomon Islands continues to review our national frameworks that will further promote and protect the human rights of all Solomon Islanders, in particular, the most vulnerable such as our women, children, and people with disabilities.

Mr. President,

I also wish to offer my deep thanks to Cuba for the training of our medical students. More than ninety Solomon Islands medical doctors have graduated from Cuban medical schools. We note with concern the 60-year-old economic embargo imposed on Cuba remains in place and we reiterate the call for the lifting of the embargo within the spirit and purposes of the United Nations Charter.

Mr. President,

Decolonisation remains an ongoing issue Solomon Islands follows at the UN. In this regard we note the ongoing UN referendum process taking place in New Caledonia. The first referendum occurred in 2018 and then again in 2020. The third referendum is scheduled for 2022 and we once again urge that the process conforms to universally accepted principles and practices of self-determination defined by resolution 1514 (XV), 1541 (XV) and other relevant resolutions of the United Nations.

Finally, Mr. President,

Allow me to conclude by commending you again on the theme for this year's General Assembly session. It could not have come at a more critical time when we find ourselves facing the deadliest pandemic that has affected our world under our watch.

The COVID-19 pandemic will shape our legacy as leaders of our countries and our world. Our responses to the pandemic will be remembered for ever by those who had lost loved ones, by those that believed we could have done more but didn't, by those that felt betrayed by their leaders, and by those that were appreciative of the collective efforts all countries of this world had undertaken to fight an invisible enemy that is only visible in the suffering and agony of those affected and those left behind.

More than 4.7 million lives have been tragically lost, and millions continue to be affected by its ongoing onslaught. Let us take time to pause and to reflect, on how this virus has changed our lives and the

way we do business as we look at ways, we can collaborate better to alleviate its impacts.

As we continue to confront the problems and challenges that our world faces ranging from climate change to the deteriorating health of our planet and the COVID-19 pandemic; we must remember, there is more that binds us together as a human race than divides us. We must dig deep and reach out to each other with a hand of friendship, and we must embrace multilateralism as an important tool to confront global challenges.

Mr President, Fellow leaders of our world, I thank you for your attention.