



# PARLIAMENTARY MEETING ON THE OCCASION OF THE UNITED NATIONS CLIMATE CHANGE CONFERENCE

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## **Address by the President of the Republic of Maldives, Mr. Mohamed Nasheed**

Your Excellencies, members of parliament, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

In 1999, I was stripped of my status as a parliamentarian. I was kicked out of parliament and sent to jail. I was jailed not for any wrongdoing. I was jailed for standing up for what I believed in: democracy, good governance and the rule of law. At that time, I was little known and had few friends, especially abroad, willing and able to help me.

But the IPU was a friend. The IPU stood up for me. The IPU used its good offices to lobby for my release. For this, I would like to say thank you.

In fact, I believe that the IPU still has my case open. They are still formally investigating to ensure I am not persecuted. Well, as President you do face a lot of criticism. But I don't think even I could claim, to still be a political prisoner!

In the past few years, the Maldives has undergone a political revolution. Before, the public was scared of talking about politics. Now, we've managed to galvanise them into political activism. Before, political parties were banned; now numerous political parties flourish. Before, the media was muzzled.

Now, it is free. We have a new constitution, enshrining basic freedoms. We have a new, democratically elected executive. And we have a new, democratically elected legislature.

There is still more work to do. Our parliament has teething problems. But I'm sure it has the capacity to overcome these toddler issues.

Overall, I am pleased to report that the Maldives is rising to take its place as one of the world's newest democracies. Issues of good governance lie at the heart of democracy. And I believe issues of good governance also lie at the heart of climate change. I believe that without good governance, you cannot have successful adaptation.

Let me give you an example from the Maldives.

The previous regime initiated a multi-million dollar adaptation project. But a few years down the line, most of the project have been halted or have failed. The reason why these adaptation initiatives failed was because the contracts were awarded to the wrong people. The harbours and breakwaters were built in the wrong places. Because local people were not consulted about the most appropriate solutions for their communities.

For me, without democracy and good governance, you cannot have successful climate change adaptation.

Yes, financing is important for adaptation. Yes, choosing the right technology is key. But without good governance and democracy, in my experience, things tend not to work.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We are not gathered here to solve democracy in the Maldives. That battle has been won. We are gathered in Copenhagen to tackle one of the greatest issues facing humanity. And I believe, on this great issue of our time, the IPU and all parliamentarians around the world, have a crucial role to play.

Climate change is happening faster and with greater severity than anyone predicted. Less than one degree of warming, since the Industrial Revolution, has caused unforeseen and unprecedented change.

In the past couple of decades, a quarter of the North Pole has melted. The world's coral reefs are in imminent danger of collapse. Greenland is starting to thaw. Australia has been afflicted by near-constant, deadly drought. And coastal erosion threatens to destroy every beach from New York to Miami.

All these changes are occurring with less than one degree of global warming. For low-lying countries like the Maldives, these changes are particularly alarming. No part of our country is higher than two meters above sea level. For us, climate change is no vague or abstract threat, but a clear and present danger to our survival.

Down the road at the Bella Centre, some major emitting countries are pledging to hold temperature rises to two degrees Celsius. But the truth is that the measures they currently propose would see temperatures rise by closer to four degrees. But with so much havoc being caused by less than one degree of warming, why on Earth would we aim for two degrees, let alone four?

Two degrees of warming spells death for the Maldives and a billion people in low-lying areas. Four degrees will wipe out most of the human race. These are the stakes we are playing for in Copenhagen.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

To my mind, whatever course of action we take must be based on the latest advice of climate scientists. Sometimes, it is easy to think that climate change is like any other international issue. It is easy to assume that it can be solved by a messy political compromise between powerful states. But the fact of the matter is, we cannot negotiate with the laws of physics.

We cannot cut a deal with Mother Nature. We have to learn to live within the fixed planetary boundaries that nature has set. And it is increasingly clear that we are living way beyond those planetary means.

I am not a scientist. But I know that one of the laws of physics is that you cannot negotiate with the laws of physics. And the science is clear. If we want to stop climate change - and avoid deadly tipping points that lead to runaway global warming - temperatures must not rise by more than 1.5 degrees. Carbon pollution in the atmosphere must return to 350 parts per million.

Thankfully, there are countries proposing sensible measures to stop climate change. The AOSIS group and the Least Developed Countries have proposed measures to halt temperature rises to 1.5 degrees, and carbon pollution to 350 parts per million. More than a hundred countries want to hold to these targets. Our task is to persuade the big, high-emitting countries to take their side.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We cannot simply ignore science because it is politically inconvenient. And we don't intend to. This is why, in March, the Maldives announced plans to become the first carbon neutral country in the world. We intend to become carbon neutral in ten years. We will switch from oil to 100% renewable energy. And we will offset aviation pollution, until a way can be found to decarbonise air transport too.

For us, going carbon neutral is not just the right thing to do. We believe it is also in our economic self-interest. Countries that have the foresight to green their economies today, will be the winners of tomorrow. They will be the winners of the 21st Century.

These pioneering countries will free themselves from the unpredictable price of foreign oil. They will capitalize on the new, green economy of the future. And they will enhance their moral standing, giving them greater political influence on the world stage. In the Maldives, we have relinquished our claim to high-carbon growth. After all, it is not carbon we want, but development. It is not coal we want, but electricity. It is not oil we want, but transport. Low-carbon technologies now exist, to deliver all the goods and services we need. Let us make the goal of using them.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Since announcing the carbon neutral policy in March this year, the Maldives has undergone something of an environmental enlightenment. We have signed two agreements with international energy companies to build large wind farms; Investors are proposing to turn our garbage into green electricity; And some of our famed luxury tourist resorts have pledged to become carbon neutral themselves.

Local people have been energized into action, with individual islands declaring carbon neutral targets of their own; Green investors and entrepreneurs are flocking to the Maldives; And it is now apparent that renewable power plants will provide cheaper electricity than existing diesel generators.

Many of these developments were not envisaged when we made the carbon neutral pledge. They have come as pleasant surprises. The lesson from the Maldives is this: when leaders set out a clear vision; individuals, investors and entrepreneurs follow. This creates a virtual circle of positive change. We need to create this momentum on a global scale.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Climate change not only threatens the Maldives; it threatens us all. And so all of us in this room have a duty to push for a planet-saving deal. Parliamentarians, in particular, have an absolute duty to take the lead. Do not fall into the trap of thinking that Heads of State can solve every issue.

On matters of defense and foreign policy, heads of state are in charge. But on the climate change issues of energy policy, transport and waste management, often parliament is more powerful.

If we fail to act now, the climate crisis will become a catastrophe, threatening the very existence of human civilization. But if all of us shows historic leadership – in each of our capacities - we can avert the crisis. And we can create a greener world, richer and more exuberant than the one we inherited.