



Speech
by the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
at the
Atlantic Conference on Eyjafjallajökull and Aviation
16 September 2010

*The speech was delivered without notes.
This is a transcript of the recording.*

Ladies and gentlemen
Distinguished company of experts and leaders in aviation:

May I begin by first thanking all of you who have come from afar in order to deliberate and discuss how in the future we will deal with the ongoing process of creation.

I call it “the ongoing process of creation” because the message which Iceland brings to the world is that the creation of the Earth is still going on. We are, however, most of us who were brought up on the Holy Bible, especially the Old Testament and the Book of Genesis, conditioned by the opening description that the Almighty created the world in six days and then decided to rest.

The problem with this account in the Book of Genesis is that it isn't completely accurate because the process of creation is still ongoing, especially in our country, the youngest country on Earth in geological terms.

The Eyjafjallajökull eruption was a reminder to the global community that this is so. Despite all the technology and the scientific achievements, we are not yet the masters of the universe and will never be. It is not a question of whether similar occurrences will happen in the future; it is a question of the scale, the consequences and how to deal with them.

Modern aviation is a recent phenomenon in human history. Jiang Zemin, the former President of China, said to me when he came to

Iceland eight years ago: “The problem with you in the West is that you haven’t understood that for us in China fifty years is not a long time.” That is approximately the period in which modern aviation has influenced our way of travelling, communicating and conducting business as well as how we think about ourselves, our societies, the world.

If we look at Icelandic history, which is relatively young compare to the history of the Chinese civilisation, our annals are full of descriptions of how volcanic eruptions in previous centuries led to what people at that time considered almost the end of the world. The annals described how darkness suddenly fell on areas, valleys and regions.

We were reminded of this during the Eyjafjallajökull eruption. One word which we all learnt at school, but perhaps never comprehended, describes the *mist*: the darkness at midday, at noon and how it prevented people from feeding the animals, collecting the hay, living a normal life.

So when the eruption occurred, Europe looked to my country again so soon after the financial collapse, and concluded: There goes Iceland again – trying to create problems and hazards for us in Europe. Some, especially those here at Keilir, thought it was our responsibility to invite experts, corporate leaders and others, all the sectors of the aviation industry as well as scientists to come together and discuss: How do we respond to this? How do we reform our human networks? That is really what it is all about, not just the science and the technology. It is about human networks and how they treat the information.

The fundamental idea behind this conference was to demonstrate our responsibility as a nation, to be a positive participant together with the rest of the world in preparing for the next occurrence and the one after that, and the one after that. Our moral responsibility to the rest of the world was to try to bring people together.

In this country, we have succeeded in creating extensive and effective plans for rescue and social response in times of volcanic eruptions. We have involved our entire society, down to the local level of valleys and individual farms and villages, together with scientists, the police, the hospitals, the medical services. Everybody comes together, all levels of our society, when volcanoes erupt or earthquakes occur.

It was a contradiction to have such an elaborate system in our own society and not to encourage the world to develop a systematic response at the level of aviation and the human networks.

So therefore I congratulate Keilir for having succeeded in bringing this conference together, but above all we are very grateful to all of you,

especially those who have travelled from afar and shared your expertise, your knowledge and recommendations, your conclusions.

It is a reminder of how the world is changing that this conference is taking place in a movie theatre on a former U.S. base which was for over a half a century, during the Cold War, one of the most critical locations. Three years ago this month, the Bush administration decided to vacate the base. I am not here to discuss the pros and cons of that decision. The fact of the matter is that it was taken. So we faced the question: What do we do with all these facilities, these buildings? We had a vision. We had a dream that it would become a location for a global dialogue, for an Atlantic centre of excellence, where people of many disciplines and different responsibilities would come together, with young people, students and those who are being trained to operate in the 21st century, come to discuss how we communicate and cooperate in this new world. This very location, the former Keflavík military base, is one of the most dramatic reminders to my generation that we do indeed live in a changing world, in a world which has moved from the blockades of the Cold War to an openness of cooperation and independence.

Therefore, I think you can take back with you from this location and from Iceland at least these two messages:

First, the Earth is still young; creation is still going on; volcanic eruptions will happen; we are not the masters of the universe.

Second, we now live in such an interdependent world that we need to cooperate at every level of our societies in order to succeed, to be safe and prosperous.

It is an indication of how famous Eyjafjallajökull has become that in my meeting three days ago with the Premier of China, Wen Jiabao, he spent the first few minutes talking about the eruption, how famous it had made Iceland in China. When he was a young student, he wrote a thesis on the geology of Iceland, the volcanoes of our country.

I must also, if I may say so on a lighter note, congratulate France for having dealt with this eruption so successfully because France has not always historically dealt with Icelandic eruptions so successfully. The famous 18th century French Revolution was, according to experts and historians, not really caused by the great philosophers or the democratic campaign. It was in fact caused by a huge and disastrous volcanic eruption in this country which sent clouds of ash over to the European continent, France and Germany. The ash fell on the ground, more or less destroyed the crops, the farming communities; they could not feed the cities, especially not Paris, as they had done before. The result was an

uprising in the capital of France which led to a dramatic transformation of the political system, not just of France, but also Europe.

The positive side of what occurred earlier this year was that we saw millions of people, ordinary people, reacting to this crisis in a relaxed, orderly and responsible way. It was an important lesson in how we are capable as a society to deal with a crisis; how at the human, economic, political and social levels, the people of different countries, passengers and travellers who were effected, were able in a calm way to face the situation. The crisis did not create the kind of pressure we would have expected if, in a workshop, we had tried to predict what would happen if air traffic over Europe suddenly stopped completely for a whole week. That is very encouraging.

On a lighter note, it was kind of positive, if I may say so, that some of my colleagues were, so to speak, humanised by this eruption. For example my friend, the President of Estonia, described to me that he was in Istanbul and couldn't get back to his country by air, so he had to drive all the way from Istanbul up to Estonia. You only have to look at the map of Europe to realise what an extraordinary journey that was. Even the Chancellor of Germany had to fly from her summit in Washington, first to Madrid, then to Rome and then drive all the way from Rome to Berlin. The first time in the history of the German Republic that the Chancellor had to travel in such a way.

Everybody was in the same situation. In that sense it was a democratic crisis. Everybody was affected in the same way, whether it was a young student, a top executive, a political leader. Such an experience has a value in itself.

This conference, as I have listened to the discussions today, has been at a very high level of expertise with representatives from companies which manufacture aeroplanes and from aviation authorities. As was hinted at in the panel discussion earlier this afternoon, the fundamental problem was how our societies are organised to deal with a crisis of this kind. Our economies, our governmental structures, our societies, the networks of communication, whether they are airlines, road traffic, railways, ferries or ships. The big task is to prepare our societies in their entirety to deal with a crisis on a similar scale and magnitude.

We observed how the global media, in a matter of hours, exerted extraordinary pressure for action on the decision-making systems of our nations. Within a few days, it had brought pressure up to the highest political level, demanding both action and responsibility from political leaders. Quite frankly, with all due respect to myself and my colleagues, those in political office, nothing had prepared us for taking decisions of

this magnitude. So we need a democratic and political task force to test our political structures, our governmental institutions and our international bodies, and how they will deal with this again.

We have had eruptions in this country that lasted not just days, but months and even longer. The volume of material that comes from inside the Earth is enormous. I am not sure whether the figure has been mentioned at this conference but I have heard experts say that the volume that came out of Eyjafjallajökull was at least a few hundred tons per second. If you try to visualise it, it is like five to ten thousand cars being thrown up in the air every minute; just try to visualize ten thousand cars being thrown up into the air every minute, for the entire day, the next day, the following day and maybe for a week or even longer. That is an enormous amount of material thrown into our environment.

It was an interesting notion which somebody mentioned here before that when you talked in previous years to authorities in many countries their response was: We don't have volcanoes in our country, so this is really not our concern. Hopefully, one of the lessons that Eyjafjallajökull has brought to the world is that nobody will say that again.

Iceland is not just the home of volcanoes. We are also the home of the largest glaciers in Europe. We know from our glaciological community that they are melting, retreating, and fast. It is predicted that in the early part of the next century, all or some of them will have disappeared.

The pressure which the glaciers put on the surface of the earth has kept the volcanoes from erupting as frequently as they otherwise would, so the process of climate change, even at the present rate, will make our glaciers disappear during the lifetime of my grandchildren or their children. According to our scientific community, that will probably increase the frequency of volcanic eruptions. There is a close link between the ongoing process of climate change and the frequency of similar occurrences to the eruption which this conference has been discussing. The combination of the retreating of glaciers and the nature of volcanoes means that we are more likely to see an increased frequency of similar occurrences.

Of course nobody can say for certain. That is also a lesson we learn from this country. Forty years ago or so, there was a volcanic eruption on the Westman Islands. That mountain was, when I was in school, listed among the so-called "dead volcanic mountains". If we got a question at an exam, which we often did, to name five dead volcanic mountains in Iceland, and you mentioned Helgafell in the Westman Islands, you got a plus. Then all of a sudden in the middle of the night in January in the

early 1970s it blew up. Fortunately, the boats were all in harbour because the winds had prevented the fishermen from going out to sea. So the entire population could be evacuated within the first 24 hours. This volcano is still so hot that you can now go to the Westman Islands with a piece of bread dough, put it into the ground and come back in the afternoon when you will have a fully baked loaf of bread.

It is a reminder that although volcanic science has progressed in the past forty years, we are still in the territory of uncertainty, of limited knowledge, of having to recognise that we are still trying to find a way to live with these extraordinary forces of nature. We must remind the world that we all must come together to adjust our civilisation, our technology, our advanced societies to the fact that the forces of nature are still with us. As I said before: We are not, and never will be, in this respect, the masters of the universe.

This conference has made important contributions. It was an endeavour on behalf of Iceland to counterbalance some of the damage which was caused by the eruption. I almost said “caused by us”, because the volcanoes are so engrained in our culture that we talk about them as if they are a part of our family. But, of course, as everybody knows, there was nothing we could have done about it.

Aviation is a remarkable phenomenon, but it has perhaps become so ordinary that we have forgotten how remarkable it really is. I came yesterday afternoon from China, and during my visit we agreed on a number of areas where China and Iceland will constructively cooperate in the years to come. One of them was research on the glaciers in the Himalayas and here in Iceland and in the Arctic. Another was the monitoring of earthquakes and how to develop rescue systems.

The fact that China and Iceland are cooperating in this way is primarily because of modern aviation. It has brought us together. During the Cold War, aviation was used to build up military strength and confrontation that ultimately threatened the world. Hopefully that will never occur again. Instead, we are reminded here in this place, the former U.S. military base, now a centre of excellence, that we have to find ways to work together as one family. Modern aviation is what enables us to do that.

The comment made by the representative of the Pilot Association during the discussion was also a very important reminder that when those of us who are not aviation experts enter an aeroplane, we put our trust in the pilot, not in bureaucracies or international authorities, or with all due respect, in the European Commission. We put our trust in the pilot. He or

she is the one. We want to know for certain that the pilot has the knowledge to decide that it is safe to take off and fly.

In the end it is a question of human responsibility, of human trust, not of organisations, bureaucracies or scientific knowledge although those are necessary ingredients. It is a question of trust and human interaction. Those who sit in the plane want to be sure that the pilot has the wisdom, the knowledge and the system to bring us safely to our destination. That is what it is all about. Whether we are in Iceland or in China, in Africa or in Europe, or in the United States.

I thank you all for being with us here in Iceland. We are grateful to you for helping us to bring people together. You allowed us to indicate to the rest of the world that we want to make our contribution, to make the world safer in the years to come.

With those words I conclude this conference and hope that the dialogue which has taken place here will be continued in a constructive way.