



Opening Address
by
the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
Third Polar Environment
3rd Workshop
University of Iceland
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*The speech was delivered without notes.
This is a transcript of the recording.*

Distinguished Rector
Scientists and scholars

I welcome especially those who have travelled from afar to be with us this morning and in the coming days when we host here in Iceland this remarkable scientific cooperation which is among the most interesting and significant of our times.

The Himalaya Region, the situation of the countries, the need to study the melting of the ice, the water systems, the glaciers – we would be hard put to find a research corporation which would be of as much significance for as many people as the one you are engaged in.

It is about four years since I was privileged to talk with Lonnie Thomson in Ohio about research on the glaciers, cooperation with China, India and other countries in the Himalayan Region, the urgent need to bring together a significant effort in this area.

I had for a long time been familiar with India, having arrived there first in 1983 for a cooperation with Indira Ghandi and then with Rajiv; I had also been to China more than a decade before. Since I came from Iceland, I somehow felt that maybe I should try to help to bring together such a cooperation, centred on what is now called the Third Pole Region and we then called the Himalayan Region.

Then meeting Yao Tandong in China last year, being invited to his remarkable institute and having the benefit of a discussion with his scientists and scholars, I became absolutely convinced that in a small way the scientific community of my country, and we as a nation, could perhaps help in some way towards furthering this cooperation. Especially since time is short, the need for knowledge is indeed urgent.

Yao Tandong came forward with the idea of hosting the third meeting of the Workshop here in Iceland. I welcomed it. I thought it brilliantly demonstrated his originality and willingness to travel where nobody had journeyed before. As everybody knows, Iceland is not in the Himalayas, so to take your third Workshop to our country was indeed, I think, a manifestation of the willingness of the leaders of this project, the two I have already mentioned and Volker Mosbrugger, to lead their fellow scientists and others into uncharted territories.

Here we are today and the Presidency is very honoured to have been part of organizing and hosting this Workshop, together with the University of Iceland, which now celebrates its 100th anniversary. The hosting of your meeting is perhaps one of the most important events of this anniversary year. It signifies not only how far we have travelled since forty students met in 1911 in our Parliament building to found the University; there was no building to host it in the city of Reykjavík and the University had to be housed in our Parliament building for the following decades. The hosting of this scientific cooperative project on the Third Pole Region is, as I have said, a remarkable manifestation of how far our scientific community has travelled and how we have succeeded, despite being a small nation, in creating a University which can make important and significant contributions to scientific discoveries on some of the most urgent topics of our times.

Iceland is, as you know, rich in volcanoes and glaciers, and this building is named after one of our most significant volcanoes. I think Iceland is probably the only country in the world where buildings are named after volcanoes, where the national airline names planes after volcanoes and glaciers. Maybe some of you came on the Eyjafjallajökull plane to Iceland. Despite the difficulty of pronouncing the name, the airline decided to use it as the name of one of their aircraft; the others also take their names from volcanoes and glaciers.

Iceland is also probably the only country where women take their names from volcanoes. Which says something about their nature. Like my four year old granddaughter, who is called Katla. You might be familiar with the fact that, until Eyjafjallajökull erupted, Hekla and Katla

were the most famous volcanic mountains in Iceland. Of course Hekla is also a very common female name in our country.

I think it indicates how the culture of our society has been intertwined with nature, with the volcanoes, with the glaciers and with the struggle of surviving in a country which provides such hazards from nature. When we witnessed the eruptions last year and this year, with their ash falls, our generation suddenly realized what the descriptions in our annals of the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries really meant. We had read in our younger days in the annals that there was darkness at midday; and people couldn't see their hands or even the sheep or the cows; there was disaster and hunger; people died. It didn't really have a meaning for us until we could witness last year and this year these extraordinary forces of nature on display in our country.

Iceland is not only, as you know the largest volcanic country in Europe; it also has the largest desert in Europe. We have been battling that desert now systematically on the basis of scientific knowledge for a century and that experience has now led us to establish educational cooperation in desertification and soil conservation with countries in Africa, Asia and other parts of the world.

We are of course, as all of you know, the home of the largest glaciers in Europe and as Helgi mentioned they are fast disappearing – and I say fast – he mentioned two hundred years. The former President of China, Jiang Zemin, said to me when he came to Iceland eight years ago: For us in China fifty years is not a long time. So for the glaciers to disappear in four times that period indicates how rapidly this is really happening.

It is worth reflecting on how such a small nation, which at the beginning of the twentieth century when the University was founded consisted of only about one hundred thousand people, could make significant contributions in so many diverse fields, not only in glaciology, volcanology and soil science but also medical science, clean energy, engineering and of course cultural studies of many types.

When we look at the Himalayan Region, we know that not only are there large nations, the two largest on earth, but there are also small countries and small communities which, like Iceland, could by themselves make significant contributions to the development of science and research in their region. The history of the University of Iceland and our international scientific cooperation, especially during the second half of the twentieth century, is a good example of how small nations and communities can be equal partners in the advancement of science.

I see your Workshop here in Iceland in the coming days as a yet another instance of the contribution our country can make, not just because of the excellence of our scientific community and the significance of the research we have done in Iceland but also because Iceland is a kind of a neutral ground to meet on and discuss and examine issues that might be sensitive if the meeting took place somewhere else.

To illustrate my point I could name some capitals in Europe and some cities across the Atlantic where the sensitivity of having this meeting might be a little bit different than when meeting here in the small, neutral and a rather relaxed setting of Iceland.

That is important, indeed, because as we all know the Third Pole Region, the Himalayan countries, is not just the area of the globe where the ice is significant but it also has some of the most sensitive borders with respect to harmonious cooperation and global peace.

Looking around us here in the North, where Iceland is situated, we also have a familiar experience of such a development. During the Cold War the Arctic was perhaps one of the most militarised areas in the world. Military bases in Iceland and Greenland and other parts of the Arctic Region, in Canada and Alaska, in Murmansk and other places, and the nuclear submarines, were evidence of the arms build-up in the North and the Arctic Regions.

When the Cold War ended (and that process, by the way, began here in Iceland at the Reykjavík Summit between presidents Reagan and Gorbachev in 1986), the nations and the communities in the North and the Arctic gradually started to cooperate. It was difficult, I can tell you, because I was quite familiar with this transformation. But it was spearheaded by scientists and researchers, scholars who came together to study the environment of the Arctic. It gradually led to intensified scientific cooperation between universities and research institutions in Arctic countries which had never cooperated before.

Consequently it was found necessary to create a framework around this cooperation. The Arctic Council was formed in the middle of the 1990s, primarily as a rather low-key cooperative forum for scientific and environmental studies.

When Iceland held the Presidency of the Arctic Council, about eight years ago, the Arctic Climate Assessment Report and the Arctic Human Development Report became crucial documents for future policymaking and scientific cooperation in this area.

When I was honoured with the Nehru Award in India a year and a half ago and when I visited China last September, I ventured to launch the notion that maybe this model of how Arctic cooperation developed from scientific dialogue and some research projects into more systematic, comprehensive and stable programme involving both the smaller countries in the Arctic and the larger ones could be something which the Himalayan Region could also look at.

We could perhaps establish a Himalayan Council, modelled on this rather soft low-key scientific research-oriented approach of the Arctic Council. Especially since a key in Arctic cooperation has been the involvement of the indigenous people who have lived in the Arctic for thousands of years long before the Republic of Iceland, the Federal State of Russia or the United States came into being. The Himalayas have people in communities who have lived there for thousands of years, long before the states were formally established.

One of the crucial tasks for us, both with respect to the Arctic and the Himalayas, is not just to do the research, to organize the scientific projects and present the conclusions and the evidence, but also to relate this to the lives of, and the challenges faced by, the people who live in the region and how they can be incorporated into this process in an open and respectful way.

I believe we have succeeded in the Arctic and in the North in doing this by formally inviting representatives of the indigenous people to be equal partners together with the scientists and researchers and the policymakers.

I decided to mention this here this morning because what you have been doing in your meetings in China and in Nepal in the last two years and what you will be doing in Iceland in the coming days is to map out a necessary and crucial cooperative programme in an area of importance. This affects not just to the two billion people who depend on the water reservoirs of the Himalayas: it is of fundamental consequence for the entire world. That is what your work is all about. We need to do it in such a way that the people who have had these regions as their home for thousands of years are also respectfully included in the process.

So I wish you great success in your deliberations. I want to thank my Icelandic friends Dagfinnur, Helgi, Thorsteinn, Thorunn and Gudrun for their contribution. I want to thank the University of Iceland for having embraced our cooperation.

I can't resist pointing out that in diplomatic terms this is also a first. Never before has a president of a country been so openly and in a relaxed

way been involved in bringing together scientific cooperation with respect to a very far-away part of the world.

I don't mention this to highlight my own involvement. I mention it to indicate that what you are doing shows new approaches, new methods. Yao Tandong came to me and said: Let's host the next meeting in Iceland! The projects you are engaged in map out a new way of cooperating.

Let's hope that these initiatives can help us all to be better prepared for the fundamental changes which the melting of the ice and the changes in the glaciers and the water systems, not only in the Third Pole Region but also in our neighbourhood here in the North, will bring to the entire world.

So I wish you great success. I welcome you to Iceland.