



Opening Address
by
the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
at
the 30th Nordic Geological Winter Meeting
9 January 2012

Distinguished scientists
Ladies and gentlemen

It is both a pleasure and a privilege to welcome you all to Iceland and to witness this manifestation of Nordic cooperation in the field of geology and other earth sciences.

This anniversary meeting takes place in the wake of remarkable displays of volcanic activity in our country, when Iceland once again reminded everyone that the creation of the Earth is still going on, and that despite all the technological progress throughout the 20th century this island can bring air traffic all over Europe to a standstill, making us humbly aware that we are not yet, and never will be, the Masters of the Universe.

For us in Iceland, the Eyjafjallajökull eruption also brought a profound understanding of our own history, a new insight into the terrible fate of people in centuries past.

We had, of course, read in the annals written many hundred years ago, descriptions of the dire consequences for the farming communities when volcanic activity, and the huge quantities of contaminated ash, poisoned and killed domestic animals, bringing famine to the nation, confusion, looting and social breakdown.

In his treatise published in 1796, Bishop Hannes Finnsson described the tragedy caused by the Laki eruption. In a northern region, more than

700 people starved to death; the country lost half its cattle and 80% of its sheep, and this was followed by a significant reduction of the population.

It had been difficult for modern Icelanders, used to advanced communication technology, a well-developed rescue system and a strong network of social and economic support and cooperation, to imagine how volcanic eruptions could have such disastrous consequences. But suddenly, in the hours and the days that followed, first the Eyjafjallajökull eruption and then the Grímsvötn eruption, we witnessed how those forces inside the earth brought darkness at noon, turned the fields into deserts and made people prisoners in their own homes.

Thus, these two volcanic events were a warning, not only to us but also to Europe and the rest of the world, that we need to advance our understanding of these forces and how they work, and the effects they can have on even the most advanced modern societies, on the global system that enables people to be constantly on the move, between countries and continents.

The melting of the glaciers, the prospect of their disappearance in this century or the next, will accelerate volcanic activity, making the coming decades a more active period of these geological events. Consequently, national economies in Europe and elsewhere will have to start preparing for more frequent disruptions caused by the volcanoes.

The topics at your meeting, on the relationship between ice and fire, between permafrost in the Northern regions and our understanding of climate change and how the storage of CO₂ can be made geologically feasible, all bear witness to the broadening of your scientific mission.

The geology, which Sigurður Thórarinsson and other scientific pioneers here in Iceland made in the middle of the last century their lives' vocation, was in many ways, a vibrant field of learning, illuminated by exciting discoveries that enabled people to enjoy a better understanding of their motherland. Thus, Sigurður Thórarinsson became not only one of the great scientists of his time but also a national celebrity. His verses and poems were turned into popular songs and people eagerly awaited his commentaries when Hekla once again made her entry.

Together with his fellow scientists, Sigurður Thórarinsson established a close connection between the people – farmers and fishermen, teachers, nurses, executives, entrepreneurs, officials, young and old – and the community of scientific experts. The pursuit of geological knowledge became a national mission – almost a democratic endeavour in which everyone could participate.

This bond between the people and the scientists developed into an Icelandic tradition, a demonstration of how to maintain a dialogue on the forces of nature affecting us all. It became engraved in our national culture, as witnessed by numerous poems and magnificent music, by how Icelandair finds it fitting to name its planes after volcanoes and Icelandic families proudly baptise their daughters Hekla and Katla. My five year old granddaughter is continuously asking when her namesake will erupt.

At the current historic crossroads, climate change has become the most critical challenge of our times, and thus the nexus between scientific endeavours and public policy, between firmly established knowledge and our economic behaviour, has gained crucial importance.

The Icelandic experience demonstrates that it is possible to bring science and the people's will together in a constructive way. This was the legacy left by Sigurður Thórarinnsson and his colleagues; it was the core of our national response to the recent Eyjafjallajökull and Grímsvötn eruptions and it is the basis of our preparations for eruptions in Katla and other volcanoes in the decades to come.

The nations of the world will only successfully prevent irreversible climate change if somehow that model is made global, bringing science to the centre of human endeavour.

I hope your deliberations in the coming days will be inspired by that mission and I am sure that your stay in Iceland will in many ways enlighten your efforts.