Address
by
the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
at the Meeting of the Joint WMO-IOC Technical Commission for Oceanography and Marine Meteorology
Akureyri
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Distinguished representatives
Ladies and Gentlemen

It is indeed a great pleasure for us Icelanders to host your important meeting in our country. From the first years of the settlement of Iceland more than a thousand years ago, the Vikings who dared to cross the Atlantic to discover a new land knew from their own experience the importance of the weather and winds, the power of the ocean currents and how their fate was determined by the forces of nature that dominated their lives.

The ancient Icelandic Sagas, written on calfskin a few centuries later, preserve in prose and poetry sophisticated knowledge of the oceans and how the weather was both an inspiration and a challenge to the human mind. The Vikings were indeed the most widely travelled people of their times and journeyed across the European continent deep into Russia, to the Mediterranean, along the African coast, and also from Iceland across the Atlantic to Greenland and further on to the new continent which was later called America.

It fell to the lot of the Icelanders in the 13th century to enshrine this history in splendid literary works. With a great seafaring tradition behind it, the Icelandic language has always been rich in concepts and terms which describe the relationship between the ocean and the weather and how people struggled to maintain their livelihood in harmony with the conditions created by natural forces.

One of the best-loved sagas is devoted to the life and times of Egill Skallagrímsson, who a thousand years ago was a farmer in western Iceland but also travelled widely in different parts of northern Europe. He was a great poet and some of his verses are still recited by children in our country. Let me quote a brief text from the saga of Egill Skallagrímsson in an English translation. I apologize in advance to the interpreters here for springing this surprise on them:

"Egill went to his ship. They hoisted the sail and put out to sea. The wind began to get up and a strong, favourable wind came. The ship raced along, and Egill spoke this verse:

> With its chisel of snow, the headwind,
> scourge of the mast, mightily
> hones its file by the prow
> on the path that my sea-bull treads.
> In gusts of wind, that chillful
> destroyer of timber planes down
> the planks before the head
> of my sea–king's swan."

I hope you all managed to grasp that this rather complex thousand-year-old poem was describing the sometimes harsh weather at sea –the phrases "sea-bull" and "sea-king's swan" are both images for a ship. What this poem still brings home to us today is that, since the very earliest times, the Icelandic language has been deeply affected by the forces of nature and the way the oceans are a shaping and creative power which determines people's lives and fortunes.

One of our greatest poets of the 20th century, Einar Benediktsson, created an unforgettable recognition of this relationship when he said: half our fatherland is the ocean, and thus indicated that our sense of nationhood is not only related to the land but is also dominated by the ocean which surrounds us.

Year after year, century after century we have been reminded that the ocean can be a harsh master. Every family in this country knows from its own experience that human lives are sometimes the price that has to be paid when fishermen battle with forces stronger than ourselves. On the first Sunday of every June all over Iceland, people gather to honour their fishermen with events and ceremonies in towns and villages. An important part of the day's programme involves reciting the names of those who have drowned over the year since everyone assembled for the previous Fishermen's Day, to express sympathy to the families and friends of those who were lost at sea.

But we are also thankful for the rich bounty which the ocean has provided and how the harvesting of both land and sea has enabled successive generations to survive despite difficult climatic conditions. During the 20th century this nation of farmers and fishermen was able to develop into a highly sophisticated modern society enjoying the advantages of various technologies and gradually established some of the highest levels of mobile phone penetration, Internet usage and home computer ownership anywhere on the planet – a society in which global communication has become a natural way of life. Yet despite this transformation, our nation has not lost its awareness of the importance of the ocean and the way that our fate is determined by the weather patterns that dominate different seasons. We will always remain an island, no matter how much technology overcomes the obstacles that this presents.

The lessons we have learned, both in modern times and throughout our history, bring home the importance of advanced knowledge of the weather and of the oceans. And it is in that spirit that we welcome your meeting here in Iceland and hope that your deliberations will strengthen the sustained efforts of all nations to work together to further our knowledge in this field.

A few years ago the great explorer Thor Heyerdahl, of Kon Tiki fame, remarked to me that it was a clear demonstration of how much we had neglected the study of the oceans that we actually know more about the moon than about the seas. At the time I thought the grand old man may have been exaggerating a little, but I have since learned from conversations with leading experts in this field that, regrettably, his observation was true. Last year I had the good fortune to have extensive discussions with scholars and scientists at the Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory of Columbia University in New York on the importance of climatic research and the study of ocean dynamics. It was certainly illuminating to hear their own experience of how difficult it has been to alert public leaders and governments to the importance of advanced research into the oceans and the weather conditions affecting the globe.

The inspiration which John F. Kennedy gave the American scientific community by declaring a future date for landing on the moon is a reminder of the importance of setting noble goals in order to expand our knowledge of the oceans and the way that, in league with the forces of weather, they determine our fate in all parts of the world.

We have, in fact, made some progress in recent years. In the beginning of the 1990's it was very difficult to generate interest among government leaders or within administrative and global institutions regarding the emerging risks associated with climate change. In the past

few years, however, highly developed international cooperation has enabled us to assemble an impressive body of knowledge which the global community by and large now accepts as an accurate description of present trends. Nonetheless, we have a long way to go before we achieve appropriately developed international cooperation and agreements on successful measures to counteract these threats to the global environment.

It is within this framework of change that your work is of extreme importance. We have to link together, in a sustained and sophisticated network of cooperation, both data acquisition and analysis of the oceans and weather patterns in different parts of the world. Without such an interrelated body of knowledge there is a great risk that the necessary changes in human behaviour and official decision-making will not gather sufficient momentum.

It was indeed regrettable that the framework of international institutions established after the Second World War – the framework which included the United Nations, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the different institutions within the UN system – did not include cooperation on the oceans. The long time it took to negotiate and establish the Convention on the Law of the Sea demonstrated that our ability to cooperate beyond our shores and for the benefit of the oceans was extremely limited. My own nation had to struggle very hard from the 1950s to the 1970s to gain international recognition for the importance of preserving the fish stocks in the oceans surrounding our island. Fortunately this led in the end to a general recognition of the 200-mile economic zone, but in the time that has passed since then, very few significant advances have been made in international cooperation with respect to the oceans.

One of the challenging tasks of the 21st century is to determine the form and the framework for such international cooperation, how we can preserve the biosystems of the oceans, how we can develop advanced scientific knowledge of the oceans, how we can secure the sustainability of fishing stocks and other important resources which the oceans conserve, how we can relate management of the oceans to the livelihood and conditions affecting people and nations on every continent.

In different parts of the world we have been reminded in recent years of the dramatic connections between the oceans and the different weather conditions. Global television has brought home to us striking images of the forces at play in such conditions. This has increased popular awareness and could positively strengthen the necessary political conditions to sustain large-scale international cooperation in this field. I sincerely hope that your deliberations here in Iceland will lead to such a

development and strengthen the effective cooperation which we so urgently need in this field.

I know it can sometimes be difficult to preserve one's optimism and determination when political hindrances or bureaucratic inertia prevent us from reaching the necessary agreements in order to maintain the pace of progress. But we can be inspired by the evolution of cooperation in the northern regions, which throughout the Cold War were considered to be primarily a "status quo" part of the world. The deep frost of the Cold War somehow harmonized with the colder climate up north, so the end result was as uneventful as the never-ending wilderness of snow and ice, where everything was covered with monotonous whiteness extending in all directions to the horizons.

But just as the Summit Meeting of President Reagan and Secretary General Gorbatchov in Reykjavík in the autumn of 1986 began the transformation of the entire of the world and heralded the dawn of the new times which replaced the darkness of the Cold War, so the northern regions have experienced vibrant changes, similar to the arrival of spring which breaks the ice covering lakes and rivers; and suddenly there is movement everywhere and the newly released streams move forward with force and vigour.

During the last ten years new states and regional organisations have been created in the north. For the first time in our history there now exists an interlocked network of organizations embracing the area from Russia across the Baltic States and the Barents Sea, through the Nordic countries, over the Atlantic Ocean and Greenland, into Canada and the United States of America.

Three regional organizations – the Baltic Council, the Barents Region Council and the Arctic Council – all of them created in the last ten years and all gaining relevance and scope with each year that passes, are a clear demonstration of a fundamental political transformation, not only bringing into being new states and new territorial bodies within states, but also creating for the first time exclusive forums for cooperation between the northern European states, Canada and the two most important states of the 20th century, the United States of America and Russia. They show how the end of the Cold War has fundamentally changed the political and economic landscape in the north and brought our regions into key positions, influencing strongly the success of the new Europe and the stability of the Russian-American relationship.

The federal structures of Russia, Canada and the United States have furthermore brought regional, provincial and state governments into significant cooperation with the smaller nation states in the northern

regions. Thus an interesting form of regional and nation state cooperation on economic, social and political issues is now being created. New entities have entered the framework of cooperation in the northern regions. In many ways the area can now been seen as a laboratory situation of how the old nation states and the regional, provincial and state governments within federal structures can evolve intensive forms of international cooperation in the 21st century and thus transform the old traditional model of diplomatic exchange.

These changes have created favourable conditions for more active cooperation, especially with the goal of preserving the environment and prevent climate change.

The North Atlantic, the Arctic area and the Barents Sea region are highly significant for the global environmental system. We know that the motor that drives the world's network of ocean currents, the foundation for the global weather system, lies around Iceland and is therefore in the very centre of the northern region. Excessive melting of the ice could disrupt the combination underlying this mechanism and consequently the entire global weather system would suffer disastrous effects.

It is, however, a sad reflection on the direction of modern scientific research that at present we lack international programmes focusing on the development of climate models for predicting future changes. Our region harbours some of the most sensitive biosystems in the world; plants and species balance on the edge of extinction, our oceans and seas are home to important fishing stocks which could be threatened by the failure of our political systems to reach agreements on the management of these critical ocean resources.

We therefore need an interconnected network to maintain sustained cooperation and dialogue within the community of scholars from different parts of the world who are interested in sharing in our explorations.

The people who lived in the north a thousand years ago, our forefathers and foremothers, were indeed among the great historical standard-bearers of discovery and exploration. In their journeys, their poems and sagas, reflections and visions they brought the north together, making the regions ranging from Russia across the Nordic countries, the Atlantic and into North America their common home. Their legacy is our heritage: a reminder of the great tradition of exploration, discovery and interdependence which the north has inherited and now, for the first time in the modern era, can become the foundation for productive cooperation and progress among all nations of the world.

The discussions and deliberations which you have been engaged in here in Akureyri are thus not only moulded by the modern discipline of science and academic research, advanced-policy making and the tools of the information revolution, but they can also be traced to a culture which, a thousand years ago, made exploration and discovery the focus of its activities.

It can serve as a stimulus for moving forward to be at the same time highly modern and steeped in deeply rooted culture. I hope that your days here in northern Iceland have given you such inspiration and vision.

The world will indeed be highly affected by the success of your discussions here in Iceland and your deliberations could become the foundation for a new level of international cooperation enhancing our knowledge of the oceans and the weather. The founding fathers who created the international framework for cooperation after the upheavals of the Second World War were, despite their foresight, unable to provide us with the necessary institutional mechanisms to elicit successful progress in this important field. It is therefore up to us at the dawn of the 21st century to finish their tasks.

We have to show that we can both be inspired by great visions and practical in our arrangements. We must be able to transcend the vested interests of traditional arrangements and bureaucratic inertia, and galvanise the available scientific knowledge in order to create strong public backing all over the world for such reforms. We must utilize the great cultural heritage which the ocean and the weather have inspired all over the world, preserved in poems and art, customs and tradition, to provide the sustained strength for cooperation among all nations of the world.

Our ancestors discovered continents and our generation has seen how journeys into space engender a new awareness of the universe. It must now be our legacy to provide future generations with the necessary framework for expanding knowledge and understanding of the oceans and the weather and the importance of the relationship between them. Without such knowledge, mankind might suffer tragedies and calamities far greater than we can now possibly imagine.

May your efforts here in Iceland be an important contribution to such reforms and thus give us the encouragement to make even further progress in the years to come.