



ONE WORLD – ONE CHALLENGE

CLIMATE CHANGE, FOOD SECURITY, AND THE CASE FOR A NEW APPROACH TO INTERNATIONAL SECURITY

**A Speech
by
the President of Iceland
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at the closing ceremony of
the International Symposium on Climate Change
and Food Security in South Asia
Dhaka, Bangladesh
30 August 2008**

Your Excellency President Iajuddin Ahmed,
Distinguished scientists, experts and policymakers,
Ladies and gentlemen.

It is a long journey from my country far away in the North Atlantic to the capital of Bangladesh: across continents and great oceans, from the cold winds of autumn and the approaching winter to the warmth, the sunshine and the humidity of your magnificent land.

Only a few years ago, such a journey by the President of Iceland would have been judged to be without significant purpose. Climate change, however, has altered the way we view the world. The challenge it presents brings countries and regions together in ways we have never known before. The fate of our nations, the future of all, rich and poor, in

Europe, in Asia and in every corner of the world, have become closely intertwined.

If everything goes as the scientists now predict, the melting of the glaciers in Iceland and Greenland and the disappearance of the Arctic ice sheet will transform the oceans, leading to rising sea levels in distant countries, threatening the livelihood of farmers and fishermen, city dwellers and villagers in Asia and Africa and resulting in serious consequences in both the Americas. Never before has the whole world been so interconnected in the face of a major adversity. Our common fate is the core of the defining challenge of the 21st century.

As a result of this changed world and this common challenge it has now become a part of my mandate to be with you here today, to begin my new term of Office by adding what we have learned in Iceland to the dialogue and the deliberations on climate change and food security in South-Asia, but also to learn from your experience and contribute to the formulation of a new vision. This is necessary so our efforts can be unified and successful in formulating a comprehensive global strategy which will enable us to prevent the impending world-wide disaster.

For a long time it was an uphill battle even to discuss climate change, because the doubters and the nay-sayers occupied centre stage. Recently, however, we have seen a fundamental shift, primarily because the evidence is now overwhelming. Research on the Arctic and the Greenland ice sheet indicates that the extent of the melting, which had been expected to occur in the middle of the 21st century, has already been reached. Global warming is now several decades ahead of schedule.

The people of Iceland witness the alarming rate at which our glaciers are melting. Some mountains and valleys, which have been covered by ice for centuries, have now become visible.

My country can indeed be described as a theatre of climate change because major natural systems are located either within Iceland or in the ocean around the country. We have the largest glaciers in Europe, and for over a century we have been struggling to contain the largest desert in Europe. The Gulf Stream encircles our island, mixing with the water produced by the melting of the Arctic, creating what can be described as the motor driving the global conveyor belt of ocean currents, influencing the climate all over the world.

However, Iceland is not only a theatre of the processes and consequences of climate change. It can also serve as an inspiration, as an example of how to prevent it through a comprehensive transformation of our energy systems. In the early years of my life, over 80% of Iceland's

energy needs were met by coal and oil. Now 100% of our electricity is produced from clean energy sources, and over 75% of our total energy, including fuel for cars and shipping, are based on hydro or geothermal power. Within the lifetime of one generation, we have transformed the Icelandic economy from being predominantly dependent on fossil fuel into a world leader in the production and consumption of clean energy.

I strongly believe that if we could do this, so can others. The problem is, however, that time is short and the hurdles are enormous. Therefore, it would seem prudent to follow two simultaneous and parallel courses of action.

One involves the transformation of our energy systems, our lifestyles, our societies, our economies, in order to minimize, and preferably prevent, climate change. Although this is a colossal task, it can be achieved, especially if we are guided by the kind of vision and confidence that inspired the end of the Cold War and brought mankind through the Great Depression and two World Wars into a new security framework.

The other course of action involves preparing for the consequences of global warming which are now already on the horizon, engaging in a comprehensive and searching dialogue on the new security challenges and defining how global and regional institutions can address the tasks ahead.

Many small island states are already giving high priority to these concerns. For them, the prospect of rising sea levels and destructive hurricanes poses a greater threat than any military scenarios have done up to now.

Similarly, continental states with long and low coasts are rapidly becoming aware of what could happen. This applies to prosperous and poor nations alike because about a fifth of the planet's population lives in coastal areas which are threatened by rising sea levels. Hurricane Katrina and the fate of New Orleans was therefore a wake-up call, not just for the United States but also for others.

Bangladesh needs no call to action as it deals with the aftermath of the devastating cyclone last fall. More seriously than any other country it faces disastrous consequences of rising sea levels; could possibly lose in the coming decades up to one third of the land mass. It is sobering to learn that according to conservative estimates sea level rise in Bangladesh is expected in the coming years to impact over 13 million people with a 16% loss of national rice production.

This is indeed a grave scenario and my visit to your country is an acknowledgement of the fact that Bangladesh has truly become a frontline state in the fight against climate change.

In recent years we have gained increasing awareness of how our eco-world is in fact a single system, how developments in a particular area of the grand mechanism of our existence may have hitherto undreamt-of consequences in another. The most dramatic contemporary manifestation of this interdependence is the relationship we have come to understand between climate change and the destruction of the soil, and how this constitutes a vicious circle.

As land loses its cover and vegetation retreats, its capacity to capture carbon is reduced, and this in turn accelerates climate change. Warmer years may result in droughts, affecting water resources and an endless number of eco-systems, often furthering the spread of dangerous diseases.

On my visit to India last February, where I was accompanied by Icelandic experts, both in glaciology and economic and social development, we entered into a missionary dialogue with prominent Indian leaders and scientists in order to raise the alarm over what is happening to the glaciers in the Himalayas. Up to now this has been one of the most neglected manifestations of how climate change would ruin our future.

The Himalayas, sometimes referred to as the water-tower of Asia, contain reservoirs for 700-800 million people on the South Asian side alone, and provide the basis for both food and energy production. If China and other Himalayan states are included, the impact of the melting of the Himalayan glaciers could profoundly affect the livelihood, and perhaps most alarmingly, the economic and food security, of over a billion people. Bangladesh is bound by the melting of the ice in the Himalaya through the dramatic effects on the major rivers that run through the Bengal delta.

Although more research is needed, some experts predict that the Himalayan glaciers are likely to disappear completely within the next 40-70 years; an alarming prospect for nations which collectively account for more than one third of mankind.

The countries depending on the Himalaya for water resources face a major challenge, which could generate conflicts and grievances across their already sensitive national borders. Yet, there is no regional mechanism for dealing with this problem or, among other things, for promoting the necessary scientific and policy cooperation. The meeting of the South Asian Environmental Ministers here in Dhaka at the

beginning of July was indeed an encouraging move, but it is important to engage beyond South Asia in more extensive initiatives and including the countries that depend on the Himalaya region for their water.

I would like to use this opportunity to suggest that perhaps the Arctic Council, which was established in the 1990s by eight countries encircling the Arctic, including the United States and Russia, could serve as a model for a new Himalayan Council. Like the Arctic Council, it could initially serve as a forum for the promotion of the necessary research, and consequently play a role in developing a constructive dialogue on how to address these challenges.

The Arctic Climate Impact Assessment, published by the Arctic Council in 2004, and based on work by scientists in the eight founding countries, was the most systematic and extensive account of recent climate change until the IPCC published its comprehensive statement last year. The Arctic report established that climate change was taking place three times faster in the northern regions than in any other part of the world.

The Arctic Council therefore provides both an important lesson and constructive guidelines for India, China and other Himalayan states, which would enable them to prepare for what might happen in the next few decades, inspire them to initiate a similar programme of scientific cooperation.

Although the prospect in the Himalayas is particularly alarming, we must acknowledge that all nations, wherever they are in the world, will be affected by climate change. It is therefore necessary that every state become a constructive partner in a global dialogue on the security implications of climate change.

Environmental challenges can translate into human conflicts, soil erosion becoming the root cause of humanitarian crises, with vicious and tragic ethnic confrontation. The crisis in Darfur is but one example. In a score of countries, in Africa, Asia and other parts of the world, the deteriorating quality of the land and the enlargement of the deserts threaten to sow the seeds of enormous crises and conflicts in the years to come.

An ever-changing natural environment confronts us with enormously complex and difficult challenges, demonstrating clearly the imperative need for fresh approaches, new ways in which the international community must address urgent policy decisions, translating scientific knowledge into improved and more effective ways of solving practical problems. Cooperation is called for more urgently than ever

before and the sharing of knowledge and experience across national borders is absolute imperative.

We need to move on from the old ways of looking at national, regional and international security towards the unfamiliar yet urgent challenges that lie ahead. The international institutions established in the aftermath of the Second World War were based on a traditional security analysis. It is now important to emphasize, as the recent EU report argues, that "the multilateral system is at risk if the international community fails to address the threats" associated with climate change.

It is therefore timely and wise to start by examining these new issues systematically. Let me here today mention some:

- The widespread water crises caused by the drying up of lakes and rivers, by the spreading of deserts and the melting of glaciers. Since many of the Earth's biggest rivers run through a number of countries, this development could cause nations to take drastic and even military action to secure their own water supplies. Already the Middle East is under intensive stress; two-thirds of the Arab world depends on water resources originating outside their borders, and Israel might lose 60% of its water supply during this century.
- In all continents, the reduction of arable land will have a severe impact on food security and create an acute crisis for hundreds of millions of people. Historically, conflicts over water and land have led to wars in Europe and elsewhere. Climate change would introduce gigantic dimensions into these traditional causes of military conflict. Increased flooding and prolonged droughts would intensify these developments and make it extremely difficult to deal with them in a comprehensive and systematic way.
- Climate refugees trying to escape droughts, hunger, water shortages and rising sea levels could bring migration between states, regions and even continents to a level hitherto unknown. Almost two billion Asians live within 35 miles of the coastlines and a large proportion of them will lose their homes as a result of rising sea levels.
- Fragile and weak states could be in danger of collapsing, and small island states could see all or most of their territories disappear. Thus, entire state structures could wither away, leaving the populations in a political no-man's land and entirely reliant on emergency aid from abroad. Similarly,

communities within states, communities with special ethnic or historical characteristics, might see their land destroyed, causing great strains on the capacity of the respective national governments. The consequences could be some form of civil war or other prolonged conflicts.

- Humanitarian crises caused by extreme weather events will become more frequent and more dramatic, creating societal and cross-border stresses with the potential for multiple security implications. Many such crises occurring simultaneously would severely test the capacity of the existing international institutions. The global demand for relief action could put the Security Council and other UN bodies into a more challenging crisis than they could ever have envisioned.

These areas of new security concerns caused by climate change support the view expressed at the Bali Conference: that combating climate change will be the central peace challenge of the 21st century. It is therefore of the utmost importance to marshal our forces, both nationally and internationally, in order to reduce global warming, since the consequences of failure could aggravate old tensions and trigger new ones all over the world, spilling over into violence, wars and military threats. Countries in Europe, Asia, Africa and both the Americas will be affected.

No one will be immune from these threats to the permanent security of our nations. Unfortunately, time is not on our side. It is already close to midnight. The evidence indicates that the warming of the planet and the melting of the ice has taken place more quickly than was previously predicted.

We must seek guidance from the heritage which has grown out of earlier global crises and model our actions with respect to the frameworks already in existence, on the treaties and institutions, both regional and global, which provide the pillars of the existing international community.

Dialogue on how this should be done, how to proceed from analysis to preventive action, how to extend and develop our international security framework, is now a clear priority.

We must initiate efforts to assess desertification controls and implement restorative technologies in a range of regions in Africa, Asia and Latin America, and we must also make every effort to increase the binding of carbon in soil and vegetation worldwide.

We must succeed in the creation of a comprehensive system of tradable carbon credits, linking it to the monitoring of changes in land use and the ecosystem carbon pool and establish ways of using the income stream generated by carbon trading to provide incentives to restore degraded soils and ecosystems. For this purpose, we could create what I have called a “Desertification Control and Carbon Trading Centre” in order to facilitate scientific exchanges and promote the adoption of new technologies.

We must improve existing programmes for graduate research and create networks of cooperation in order to foster the growth of a global community of committed scientists, who would collaborate with governments and international authorities and engage both the private sector and civil society to think in constructive and novel ways. If the four pillars of modern society – scientific communities, governments, business sectors and civic associations – can unite and combine their resources, we can build the foundations for enormous success.

We were able to land a man on the moon and gain extensive knowledge of its landscape. Now we have to face the startling fact that we know less about the Earth's oceans than we do about the lunar desert.

We therefore need a similar call to action, a visionary collaboration between brilliant minds accompanied by an invitation to all concerned citizens to become involved, to be heard and counted.

The Law of the Sea was created after a prolonged period of negotiation. It was a monumental achievement, regulating what before had been open to conflicts and confrontation. Its wisdom is now acknowledged even by those who earlier were reluctant to sign on. It can be both a model and an inspiration for the task ahead.

For my country, the Law of the Sea was a triumphant demonstration that military confrontation and conflicts over economic zones could be replaced by a legal and systematic approach to solving problems between nations. It guaranteed the security of our waters, while enabling the nation to harness its ocean resources. It was an innovative and brilliant framework created by constructive cooperation between scientists and experts, legal minds and policymakers, political leaders and international authorities.

The international symposium here in Dhaka is an important contribution to a similar global cooperation. We must not allow ourselves to fail in this endeavour. If we do so, our children and grandchildren will have every right to blame us.