

His Excellency, Tommy E. Remengesau, Jr. President of Palau

Let me first say that I am very honoured to be here today to host this important High Level Side Event. It is truly a privilege to be among so many international and island leaders committed to the conservation of not only our planet, but also our islands. I am glad that I was able to bring some Palauan sunshine with me to Brazil so that we can all have a sense of our island wonders.

[Special Recognitions]

Before we enjoy our food and our presentations here tonight, let me take a brief moment to offer my sincere appreciation to all of those individuals who have helped to make this event happen. First I would like to offer a very special thanks to our co-host France. Your willingness to co-host this event clearly demonstrates France's strong and comprehensive commitment to preserving our Planet's biodiversity.

I would also like to offer my sincere thanks to the many co-sponsors who have made this event possible:

The Governments of the United Kingdom;
Italy;
The Nature Conservancy;
The Secretariat for the Pacific Regional Environment Programme
ICRAN;
The WWF;
The World Conservation Union
Conservation International; and very importantly --
Our local NGO partners in Micronesia –

- The Palau Conservation Society;
- The Conservation Society of Pohnpei; and
- The Micronesia Conservation Trust.

I would also like to acknowledge the participation of traditional leaders from island countries that are here in Curitiba, having participated in the Community Taba earlier last week.

My friends, the clock is ticking on all of us. At no time in the history of our planet have the consequences of our country and global actions had such dynamic implication for the future of our planet. Decisions that we make today, commitments that we make today and programs that we implement today may truly stem the tide of our current environmental disintegration.

Unfortunately, islands are not the simple paradises as they are often portrayed in popular literature. They are extremely vulnerable political entities that often are the first to feel the consequences of careless treatment of our planet's environment. As such, they are a test case for our seriousness in initiating global responses that will effectively stem the tide of global environmental degradation that we see growing every day. But they are a much bigger test case than many imagine.

The islands of this world represent more than 600 million people, one quarter of the nations of the world, 16% of the planet's known plant species and more than half of the world's tropical marine biodiversity. And they are currently under attack. Thirty percent of our world's coral reefs are severely damaged and, without immediate action 60% may be lost by 2030. Half of the species in the world that have become extinct have been island species. These are real statistics with expanding dangers.

While this is my first Conference of the Parties under the Convention on Biological Diversity, I have followed its progress closely. And I must admit that I have often wondered how the international community could afford to send people throughout the world just to hash out the contents of a piece of paper – a 'Programme of Work'. Sadly, I must admit that I have been astounded at how much has been written on the issue of biodiversity and how little has been accomplished.

I was then made aware of a simple stroke of genius – one that finally spoke to, and that has the potential to meet, the real needs of small island nations – one Programme of Work – to address all our primary concerns relating to the issue of island biodiversity. That is why I decided to come to Brazil to be with you and to co-host this event.

I want to truly commend the Programme of Work on Island Biodiversity. It not only recognises that island biodiversity is a critical foundation for sustainable development and cultural integrity on each of our islands, it also comprehends that island ecosystems are critical to the welfare of our planet's environment as a whole. Only with this recognition will the work of the COP have real significance to island countries. And only with this recognition will the COP be able to move forward with real programs directed at the unique issues of island countries.

This new Programme can truly act as a framework to guide scarce resource allocations, including assistance through the GEF, and to serve as a mechanism to assist islands to deal with their obligations under the CBD in an integrated manner. Most importantly, it brings our islands together in a single umbrella, allowing new political and ecological connections and partnerships to be formed.

My friends, this Programme will empower us – this Programme will empower the Convention – this Programme is exactly what is needed to achieve the Convention's targets – not only the 2010 target we adopted at the WSSD in Johannesburg, but also the most recent 2012 targets for the protection of our marine areas.

Let me be very blunt about these targets. They are rapidly approaching and I am very concerned that they will not be met unless we put some added wind in our sails and rapidly move forward. We must therefore take action now. It is in recognition of the fact that time is slipping away and also in celebration of the Programme of Work on Island Biodiversity that, along with my counterparts across Micronesia, I have committed Palau to the 'Micronesia Challenge' - a shared commitment by the countries and territories of Micronesia to a comprehensive system of protected area networks.

The Challenge will commit at least 30% of the nearshore marine and 20% of the forest resources, in each of our countries and territories across Micronesia, to effective conservation by 2020. Not only will this protect our future, it will contribute to global targets set forth at the World Summit on Sustainable Development and the Convention on Biological Diversity for protected areas, island biodiversity and to the sustainable livelihoods of island communities. This initiative expands upon the already progressive approach being taken towards conservation in Micronesia, where there are currently more than 50 formally established terrestrial and 50 marine protected. In Palau alone, we are already formally protecting approximately 20% of our total reef, mangrove and lagoon area. We also have under formal protection almost 17% of our total forest area. We take our conservation seriously because traditional island communities depend almost entirely on the biodiversity of their islands to sustain their livelihoods.

Making announcements about conservation commitments and establishing laws to protect our resources is one thing. Achieving these goals and enforcing these laws is another. Consequently, in order to translate this broad commitment and laws into concrete actions, I will be working with the other Micronesian countries and territories, as well as with donors and NGO partners, to organize a meeting in Palau later this year to develop an action plan to implement the Micronesian Challenge, with specific milestones leading up to 2020. Within this context, I am asking that our countries and territories commit to meeting every two years to measure progress against the targets we set for ourselves. I would ask that all of our implementation partners support us in defining this plan.

I promise you tonight that the Micronesian Challenge will not be a challenge of mere words.

As leaders in the fight to preserve our environmental future, we cannot make commitments without understanding the importance of capable partners. I think that if any group in the world has the understanding, the right and the knowledge to say 'no man is an island', we do. In Micronesia, we have been very lucky to have developed networks of environmentally concerned representatives and friends, many of them in this room tonight, to build and to strengthen regional and international partnerships. It is a testimony to the importance of nature in our daily lives and to the power of our common interests that we are here today to work together to achieve our goal of an environmentally

sound future for our children. We must continue to build on these partnerships. And if these partnerships are to be successful, we must continue to expand the resources that we contribute to these partnerships.

Our strength resides in our commitment and in our numbers. And as I look around this room I see these numbers growing. I also see a strong framework for a Global Island Partnership among the leadership here tonight – the countries, donors and organizations – public and private, government and non-government. I call on all of you to work with me and with the Micronesian region to advance island and marine biodiversity once we leave Brazil. I challenge all of us to establish tangible examples of progress to achieve effective conservation and to sustain the livelihoods of our people. And I urge our coalition to provide the essential political leadership and institutional support that will ensure that this global and regional partnership will flourish and continue to grow.

My friends, the Micronesia Challenge is our contribution to this Global Island Partnership. We call on the organizations represented in the room to work with us to translate the Micronesia Challenge and this Partnership into something so tangible, so real and so everlasting that our children and their families remember us well. We call on our partners to help us ensure that we did the right thing at this time in our parallel histories. And we call on our partners to aid us in initiating our own history, one that provides choices, security, a beautiful environment and the continued hope for our island futures. Let us do the right thing and let us begin tonight.

This is our truly our global challenge.