



Special Commemorative Session of the Assembly of the International Seabed Authority to mark the 25th Anniversary of the establishment of the Authority

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STATEMENT

by

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The first time I participated in this Assembly was twenty-four years ago, in 1995, during the second session of the newly established Authority.

At that time I witnessed the election of the first Secretary-General of the Authority, Satya Nandan of Fiji.

Most of the delegates present at that time were veterans not only of the Preparatory Commission but also of the Third UN Conference on the Law of the Sea. Some of those veterans had been present right from the very beginning of the discussions in Caracas in 1974. A few had even taken part in the meetings of the Seabed Committee from 1967 to 1972.

I had no idea then that almost twenty-five years later I would be following in their footsteps and would be sitting here myself.

Sitting where I am today and reflecting on the fact that I have participated in 20 out of the 25 sessions of the Authority, I am struck first by the fact that 25 years is a remarkably short time in the life of an international institution.

But I am struck even more by the fact that this 25-year period represents only the latest stage in a process of progressive development of the law of the sea that has taken place almost continuously over the past 50 years, since Arvid Pardo made his famous speech to the first committee of the General Assembly of the United Nations.

In fact, we can go back even further than that. It was as long ago as 1947 that the Commission to Study the Organization of Peace proposed that so-called open territory such as Antarctica, the seabed, the high seas and outer space should be placed under international administration. The objective was twofold: first, to reserve the use of these parts of the global commons exclusively for peaceful purposes; and second, to regulate access to their resources for the benefit of all States.

In many respects, the idealism of the immediate post-war period did not endure. Reality, in the form of national interest, competition for resources and economic pressure, intruded.

Yet in one case – the deep seabed and its mineral resources – the idealistic vision persisted.

It was based on a fundamental and innovative concept: that at least one part of the global commons – our common heritage – could be managed in a way that brings benefit to all of humanity, free of conflict and competition, and so as to prevent damage to the marine environment.

To bring this dream into reality is a unique experiment in civilization.

It is not an understatement to say that the regime for the deep seabed, implemented through the Authority, is one of the most complex and ambitious systems of global governance that humanity has yet devised.

One of the key objectives of the regime was to prevent a scramble for resources by technologically advanced countries at the expense of the less developed, whilst preserving the right of all States to access the resources of the seabed. Thus, no State or entity is permitted even to explore the seabed, let alone collect minerals, except under a contract with the Authority and with the sponsorship of a State that is a party to the Law of the Sea Convention.

Let us not forget that the alternative would have been that access to resources would have been on a first-come, first-served basis, without international management and with no global environmental standards.

In this respect, the Authority has achieved unqualified success. Through painstaking diplomacy, and a process of consensus building around detailed rules and regulations, the Authority achieved three important objectives:

First, all the so-called pioneer claims made before the entry into force of the Convention were brought under the single regime of the Convention and the 1994 Agreement;

Second, there have been no unilateral claims to seabed resources since entry into force;

Third, the Authority has attracted significant investment in deep sea exploration in the form of 29 – soon to be 30 – contracts involving 22 different States Parties. Significantly, this includes several developing countries which would not have the capacity to access the deep sea were it not for the preferential rights given to them under the Convention.

Far from damaging marine ecosystems, the intensive exploration work that has taken place under these contracts has added enormously to the total sum of human knowledge of the marine environment, thus contributing to one of the other objectives of the legal regime – which is to promote and encourage marine scientific research for the benefit of all humanity.

The Clarion-Clipperton Zone, for example, in the Pacific Ocean, is one of the most intensely studied areas of the seafloor on the planet as a direct result of the investment that has been made in mineral exploration work.

Thanks to ISA-mandated requirements to collect environmental baseline data, hundreds of new species have been discovered and categorized and we have learnt a great deal about the geophysical and geochemical characteristics of the seafloor. Furthermore, thanks to the global nature of the regime, all these data are publicly available to be freely shared between scientists from developed and developing countries.

The research undertaken as part of these contracts is the main source of data and knowledge helping us to better understand the deep seabed ecosystems and functions. It is through this research that we will be able to identify the best measures required to minimize environmental impacts wherever in the ocean they occur.

At the same time, it is clear that greater international cooperation to advance marine scientific research in the deep seabed is required and will be key to the sustainable development of our oceans. Strengthening multidisciplinary and cross-sectoral multi-stakeholder cooperation at all levels will be essential to addressing capacity and other gaps in ocean science.

From transforming the scientific capacity of Pacific island countries dependent on the ocean for their survival, to increasing ocean literacy for the sustainable development of Africa's Blue Economy – international cooperation to advance deep sea marine science will be essential to unlocking the potential of our oceans.

And so, 25 years on, we can be justly proud of the many achievements of the Authority as well as eternally grateful to all of those from many different countries who guided us along this voyage.

Inevitably, many of them have left us along the way, and we pay tribute to their leadership and vision. The halls of this conference building echo with their memory.

The past 25 years have provided us with a solid foundation on which to build for the future and are a demonstration of what we can accomplish when we work together with a common goal.

For those of us approaching the status of veterans, the goal should be to instil in the next generation that same sense of wonder and respect for the ideals embodied in the Convention – our strong global ocean treaty – that we learned from our seniors.

There has never been a time of greater promise or greater challenge for the future of our oceans.

The rich biodiversity and large mineral deposits found on the sea floor create exciting challenges and opportunities to further develop a sustainable future. Thanks to all that has been achieved over the past 25 years, we have an opportunity to put in place stringent and effective rules for these resources that balance conservation and sustainable use, and to do so before extraction begins – something that has not been achieved in any other sector.

This is a unique opportunity and we owe it to the founding fathers of the Convention to seize the opportunity with both hands.

But we must do so with full confidence and trust in the legal regime that has been established over more than 50 years and that has evolved over 25 years from this small island of Jamaica.
