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GOVERNMENT OF THE COOK ISLANDS

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International Seabed Authority

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Mr President, Excellencies and distinguished delegates. Kia Orana and warm Pacific greetings to you all.

It is with great pleasure that I address this 28th International Seabed Authority session as the Prime Minister of the Cook Islands.

Almost fifty years ago, in 1974, the Cook Islands first Prime Minister, Albert Henry, addressed the third United Nations conference on the law of the sea in Caracas, where he shared my country's aspirations and hopes for the proposed Constitution for the ocean.

At that time the Cook Islands had been independent for only ten years. Since then, so much has changed but just as significantly so much is still the same. The concepts of fairness, mutual respect, sustainable development and environmental management are still at the core of what we say and do.

Today, it is my turn to reflect on my country's aspirations and hopes.

In this address, and with your attention, let me explain further:

The Pacific Ocean is inseparable from Pacific peoples, cultures, economies, and societies. Our Moana Nui O Kiva, our Blue Pacific Continent, is our lifeblood. It is part of our identity. We have always lived in harmony with our ocean and for us that harmony is non-negotiable.

We consider ourselves proud voyagers and stewards of our ocean, ensuring that we proceed with caution to enable both the conservation and the sustainable use of our marine resources. In this we are not alone. Our Pacific neighbours, of similar circumstance, share not just our values, but our mana, our spiritual strength.

Within our Blue Pacific Continent, deep seabed minerals hold immense potential for our growth and prosperity. If we are to develop this potential – it is our duty to do so responsibly and sustainably, for the long-term well-being of our people and the preservation of our unique marine environment.

As Pacific peoples, we are acutely aware of the pressing challenges we face in protecting and managing our Blue Pacific Continent. As the custodians of nearly 20 percent of the earth's surface, we are committed to combating the ongoing threats of climate change, loss of biodiversity, waste, and pollution. To significantly reduce humankind's contribution to climate change the global community needs to use every tool at its disposal. Critical metals are a tool that we can help with, today.

Key to the sustainable development of seabed minerals is the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, which provides us with a global legal regime for the stewardship of our oceans, anchored in the best available science with the precautionary approach at its core.

I take this opportunity today to reaffirm the Cook Islands commitment to UNCLOS as the global regime for the stewardship of the global commons. As a State party to UNCLOS, and more particularly as a Pacific Small Islands Developing State, we place a very high value on the principles and rights enshrined in UNCLOS. Rights that were hard fought and the result of decades of negotiations and compromise, and to which all here as States Parties are bound to respect, in good faith.

This is a critical test of multilateralism and the rules-based order. Upholding this fundamental heritage that has united us all for more than 40 years is a shared responsibility. We also remain steadfast in our support of the International Seabed Authority's efforts. As the organisation tasked with regulating activities in the Area, protecting the marine environment, and promoting marine scientific research for the benefit of all – the ISA plays a critical ocean governance role.

Through UNCLOS, we are collectively putting in place the regulatory frameworks and processes that ensure the effective protection of the marine environment before any decisions on the exploitation of seabed minerals can occur.

This will ensure the sustainable and responsible development of seabed minerals for the benefit of all humanity. These will be robust, inclusive, fair and in the spirit of UNCLOS and the common heritage of humankind.

All of this, before any application for exploitation has been considered. This is unprecedented in human history. It is in itself the best testament of the strength of UNCLOS and of its capacity to give life to the precautionary approach.

Today, we are at a crucial juncture as the ISA continues to progress the development of the rules for the exploitation of minerals in the Area. This has garnered increased interest and scrutiny in the activities of the Area. Now more than ever, we must reinforce the integrity of and respect for the rights enshrined within UNCLOS and ensure that the institutions created for its implementation are supported.

We should not be fearful. Instead, we must continue to take a precautionary approach, allowing our decisions to be based on facts, and on scientific evidence. We must advocate further for extensive and effective marine scientific and commercial research to better understand the ecology of the Marine Environment. We need to accept peer reviewed data, not based on ideological positions, but on good practice and results that follow suit.

At the national level, we in the Cook Islands have taken, and continue to take, a precautionary approach towards the development of our seabed minerals sector, in harmony with our high environmental, social, and cultural values. We have spent the last two decades preparing our laws, strengthening our regulatory bodies, expanding our knowledge base, and most importantly bringing our people along on our seabed minerals journey.

Our efforts have centered around transparent decision-making, inclusive processes, and environmental stewardship, ensuring that our actions are guided by science and the needs of our people.

Currently, we are on a journey of discovery and understanding of our deep ocean – our Exploration programme holds the key to unlocking our oceans resources responsibly and sustainably. Mindful of the trust placed in us by our people, we are excited to share the knowledge we are learning and creating opportunities for our people to be part of our journey.

This wealth of newfound knowledge will guide us in the important decisions we will need to make in the future about our seabed minerals sector.

These decisions will take account of the potential impact on the environment, the benefits for the people of the Cook Islands, and the important contribution our minerals can make to enable the global green transition towards a low carbon society to help combat climate change. Reflecting upon our global, regional, and national efforts, it is clear to me that we are well on our way to charting a course for responsible and sustainable management of seabed minerals.

With those remarks, let us strengthen our collective resolve and commitment towards our Blue Pacific Continent, that balances economic progress with environmental stewardship, leaving a legacy of resilience and prosperity for generations to come.

As I said to you at the start – my people are proud voyagers, and a thousand years ago, they built boats that could sail into the wind. Navigating by the stars, they discovered the small islands that make up Polynesia.

We are voyagers still today, undertaking a voyage of discovery. But our new voyage doesn't take us across the ocean – it will take us beneath the ocean. To make new discoveries as our ancestors did. To gain the knowledge and understanding of our deep ocean.

These voyages require courage and vision. I am under no illusions about the adversities we will face, but we trust in our ever growing knowledge, our collaborative approach and look towards the future with hope and trust.

This is how I hope we can best serve our Cook Islands people, our country and the rest of the world.

Kia Orana and Kia Manuia