

بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِیْمِ



Inaugural Address
by
His Excellency Maumoon Abdul Gayoom,
President of the Republic of Maldives,
at the
Maldives Partnership Forum

*Bandos Island Resort, Male' Atoll
Monday, 26 June 2006*

بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِیْمِ

Honourable Ministers, the UN Resident Coordinator, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentleman:

I extend a very warm welcome to all of you, especially to those who are visiting the Maldives for this event. I wish you a fruitful meeting and a very pleasant stay in our country.

This is indeed an historic gathering. It is being organised jointly by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the UN system, for national and international partners to discuss the significant challenges facing the Maldives at a critical juncture of the nation's history.

The Maldives Partnership Forum is a window of opportunity to establish long term partnerships with key international development agencies. A partnership aimed at seeking dialogue, engagement and collaboration in addressing key national development issues.

Before I proceed further, I would like to thank the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dr. Ahmed Shaheed, and the UN Resident Coordinator and UNDP Resident Representative, Mr. Patrice Coeur-Bizot and the UN system for organising this Forum.

Distinguished Participants;

It was 18 months ago today that the devastating tsunami struck the Maldives. The disaster left a trail of destruction, misery and suffering nationwide. On overall national impact, none of the tsunami-affected countries had to suffer the same extent of damage as did the Maldives.

During the past one and a half years, satisfactory progress has been made in a number of areas, but there are also continuing challenges.

The national recovery programme that we had begun after the tsunami has received substantial assistance from a wide section of the international community. I wish to thank the governments and the donor agencies and associations, as well as individuals, for that generous assistance. However, the funding gap remains significant, and it is important to find ways to bridge the shortfall-

Distinguished Participants;

As you know, the Maldives is a rapidly changing country. Economic and social progress over the past twenty years has taken the country to new horizons of development. At the same time, we are embarking on major political and legal reforms to strengthen democratic governance and respect for human rights.

Even on demographic factors alone, given the high proportion of adolescents and youth in the population, the country is on a threshold of a major transformation.

In such a backdrop, it is imperative that new partnerships are forged, and existing ones strengthened, to ensure that the Maldives can face up to these challenges confidently, successfully and smoothly.

Distinguished Participants;

As we begin a new phase of national development, we must be fully aware of the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead. To attain the aspirations of the people, there are a number of vital areas that we have to focus on.

The first and most important area of focus is of course the post-tsunami national recovery programme. The human, material and financial cost of the disaster was unprecedented, and full recovery for the Maldives is still some years away. There is much work ahead of us. Nevertheless, it does not diminish the fact that much progress has already been made over the past 18 months.

The Maldives tsunami recovery programme has indeed been a true partnership. The Government has been driving the programme forward in partnership with the donor community, and of course the support of the people. Redevelopment has begun on three islands, and the economy is registering improved figures.

I must stress, however, that bridging the existing funding shortfall as soon as possible is of the utmost importance. We appreciate the effort that our development partners have been putting into this endeavour. I am confident that the partnerships forged and strengthened at this Forum will yield encouraging results in this aspect.

The further social and economic development of the country is another vital area. Much has been achieved during the past two decades, but there is a lot more to be done. We must now focus on the way forward. Healthcare and education are

high priorities, as is the broadening of our economic base. The 7th National Development Plan must be the blueprint for the next five years, and I am confident that this Forum will be a platform on which we initiate this important endeavour as partners.

Environmental protection and preservation is another such area. As a country with an extremely fragile environment and a high dependence on its marine resources, it can be said that the very survival of the Maldives hinges on the elements.

Therefore, mitigation against environmental challenges and raising public awareness on global environmental threats are matters of high priority for the Maldives. I am happy to say that we have benefited greatly from the support and assistance of bilateral and multilateral development partners in this respect too.

Our earnest hope is that this relationship will be fostered in the time ahead, as we seek to protect and enrich the lives and livelihoods of the people. The sheer magnitude of the environmental challenges faced by the Maldives highlights the importance of donor assistance in fulfilling this task.

Distinguished Participants;

One of the key challenges that we face is that of building capacity in important areas of development. For a country with a population of only 300,000, the importance of developing human resources cannot be overstated.

We have, over the years, invested heavily in this area, and I am pleased to note that the results have been most promising. The country is being driven today by a new generation of highly educated young professionals, both in the public and private sectors.

The primary objective of this Forum, which is to forge stronger bonds and partnerships in national development,

emphasises our present and future needs in national capacity building. We seek technical expertise, scholarships and training opportunities, to empower our young men and women for future national development.

The demographic transition in the Maldives is in fact at the heart of the democratic reforms that are on track today. The further development of the country hinges on the success of the current political and legal reforms. I am confident that these reforms will usher in a modern liberal democracy in the Maldives.

One of the strengths of the reform programme has been the high degree of transparency with which it is being implemented. This, in turn, has assured that many of our development partners have already contributed towards the constitutional, legislative and institutional changes that have come about over the past two years.

I take this opportunity to call on our stakeholders to continue their engagement and to help us in accelerating the process.

Distinguished Participants;

The Maldives will be graduating in five years' time from the list of Least Developed Countries.

Graduation from LDC status is, indeed, a very unique experiment. Only one country has so far been graduated – Botswana. So far, not one small island developing country has been graduated.

Graduation from the list of LDCs is often viewed purely in economic terms. This Forum can be used to develop the necessary dialogue to access the necessary support and assistance required to ensure a smooth transition for the Maldives. Indeed, the challenges, constraints and opportunities of graduation are

issues that the Maldives and its development partners need to discuss extensively.

Distinguished Participants;

I am happy that the Maldives Partnership Forum will be a permanent feature of dialogue with the country's development partners. It would become a platform for addressing the long term development objectives of the country and chart out follow-up action. Through the Forum, the donor community will get a clear opportunity to contribute to shaping the country's progress.

I hope your deliberations will formulate a mechanism for successive meetings of the Forum.

The Maldives today is a country with new mindsets, new aspirations and with new horizons. What we behold is a vision of a country where everybody is happy, and everyone is empowered to pursue their cherished dreams and goals. To achieve that vision of an empowered and inclusive society, where everybody works together in full freedom to achieve national progress, we need a new social compact and a renewed international partnership.

It is my hope that this Forum will contribute to such a process.

Thank you.