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Statement

by

**Her Excellency Ms. Dunya Maumoon,
Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Maldives,**

on

**The Human Dimension of Climate Change in the Maldives and Small
Island States**

at

The World Bank workshop on the *Social Dimensions of Climate Change*

Eugene R. Black Auditorium - World Bank – Washington, DC

5/6 March 2008,

Madam Chair, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen:

May I begin by thanking the World Bank for organizing this important event. By working on the social dimension you will take another step towards establishing climate change as the human imperative of our time.

I stand before you today to speak for those who are most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. These are the people who will bear the highest costs and yet are rarely heard. These are the fathers who will lose their jobs, the families who will lose their homes, the communities whose human rights will be compromised, and the ordinary people who will lose their lives.

The immediate effects of climate change threaten small island states like the Maldives. But the far-reaching impacts will reach into every community and neighborhood on the planet. It is a global problem and it is our collective responsibility to respond effectively.

Over the course of these two days you will craft a response that draws on the weight of scientific evidence, prepares inputs to the political negotiations, and establishes the social dimensions of this unfolding human tragedy. I ask you at every step to remember what is really at stake here. I urge you to listen to the voices of the vulnerable.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In 2007 climate change achieved a new level of global attention. The IPCC drew a definitive line under the scientific debate. Today mainstream opinion accepts that global warming is real, accelerating and human induced.

The UNDP's Human Development Report warns that climate change, if left unchecked, has the potential to cause a major human development reversal in our lifetime. As the Report makes clear, it is the poor who are bearing the brunt of global warming.

These two seminal documents were instrumental in generating unparalleled media attention, and raising awareness among the general public to new heights. As the year drew to a close a great sense of optimism and momentum guided the delegates who gathered in Bali.

There is no doubt that the political landscape is shifting, and the case for climate protection is gathering pace. A genuine window of opportunity is opening that could lead to a comprehensive global consensus. We must make sure to seize this opportunity. For while the Bali process has potential and promise, there are also a number of developments that cause us great concern.

For many centuries arbitrary lines have divided the vulnerable from the prosperous. In 1884 delegates at a conference in Berlin drew arbitrary lines across a map of Africa, launching a period of unrestrained colonization that devastated a continent, its natural resources, and its people. Years later, delegates at a conference in Yalta drew a new set of lines, dividing the continent of Europe for more than fifty years.

In December there is a danger that the delegates who will gather in Poznan will draw another set of arbitrary lines, but this time the divide will be determined by a thermostat rather than a map, and the consequences may be irreversible.

Much of the international community is beginning to settle on a consensus that will allow greenhouse gas emissions to settle at four hundred and fifty parts per million, a projected temperature rise of two degrees Celsius. What does this mean?

The United Kingdom's Meteorological Office estimates that a two degree Celsius rise will expose between two and three billion people to water shortages as glaciers melt, droughts become more common, and seawater seeps into fresh water supplies. Those already lacking water will suffer greater stress.

The UN Food and Agriculture Organization warns that the poorest countries will suffer severe losses in crop production, increasing the number of undernourished people and severely hindering progress in combating poverty. Those who suffer hunger will find it harder to grow food.

A two degree Celsius rise means that an estimated fifty million people worldwide will be displaced by 2010 because of drought, desertification and rising sea levels. In Small Islands, sea-level rise is expected to exacerbate storm surges, erosion and other coastal hazards, thus threatening vital infrastructure, settlements and the facilities that our communities depend on. Those whose lands are eroding from an encroaching desert or rising sea-levels will find it harder to build a home and raise a family.

The World Health Organization estimates that more than one hundred and fifty thousand people die each year as a result of climate change as diseases spread faster in higher temperatures. An additional two degrees Celsius will mean an additional two hundred million people will be exposed to malaria alone. Those who are already weak will find themselves increasingly at risk from new and more prevalent infectious diseases.

These effects will make it increasingly difficult for the poorest forty per cent of the world's population – some two point six billion people – to build a better life for themselves and their children; and will reinforce the vast disparities between the “haves” and “have nots”. These findings are supported by the Stern Review, which concluded that climate change will trigger a global recession on a scale similar to those associated with the Great Wars of the twentieth Century.

If we settle on two degrees Celsius, millions of vulnerable people will find themselves on the wrong side of the climate change line, and the international community will be on the wrong side of history.

Our benchmark for success cannot be an arbitrary number, selected because it seems politically feasible. Our one and only benchmark must be the protection of the most vulnerable communities on the planet.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

For much of the world the climate impacts I have described seem like abstract threats that lie waiting in a distant future. For the people of the Maldives they are all too evident in the here and now.

The devastating tsunami of 2004 exposed our vulnerability to nature. This past year the storm surges that flooded nearly eighty of our islands simultaneously served as a grim reminder of that fateful December day. Today more than half of our two hundred inhabited islands are suffering from beach erosion. With three-quarters of our land no more than one metre above sea-level the surrounding ocean that has sustained our people for so long now seems more foe than friend. We in the Maldives do not need to be convinced by the science of climate change. The evidence is all around us.

Our twelve hundred islands, forming an archipelago in the Southern Indian Ocean, have been our home for more than three thousand years. Today two hundred of these islands provide a home to a growing population in excess of three hundred thousand people.

For much of our history our remote location, coupled with the scarcity of natural resources, made life in the Maldives was a challenging proposition. But we are a proud, resilient and innovative people. Three decades ago we began a process of economic development that has transformed our society. In thirty years we have moved from being one of the Least Developed Countries on this planet, to having the highest per capita income in our region.

Our economy grew at an average rate of more than seven per cent during the 1990s, propelled by tourism and related sectors such as construction, transport and telecommunication. With this growth has come rising individual prosperity for many citizens. Poverty levels have declined from twenty three per cent in 1997 to less than ten per cent today. These economic gains mean that we are now poised to graduate from the Least Developed Country status. The Maldives is also one of the few developing countries on-course to meet most of the Millennium Development Goals.

Climate Change threatens all of this.

In the short-term storm surges and coastal erosion cause loss of homes, pose dangers to infrastructure and utilities, and divert limited resources from strategic development to a cycle of destruction and reconstruction.

In the medium term the projected two degree Celsius rise in temperature would lead to the extinction of our prized coral reefs, the very lifeblood of our economy. Our two principal industries – tourism and fisheries, are entirely dependent upon them. Together they account for forty per cent of our GDP and more than forty per cent of our workforce. This would set our development back decades.

The unprecedented development in the Maldives during the past three decades means that this generation is the most fortunate to have ever lived on the islands. If we do not act quickly, this generation may also be the most fortunate one that ever will. For in the long-term it is not our development but our very existence as an island nation that is threatened. The IPCC warn that sea-levels could rise by ninety centimetres by the end of the century. If the scientists are right, a child born in the Maldives today may not have the opportunity to live out his life in the country of his birth.

We are working to avoid this fate with a comprehensive program of domestic adaptation. We have moved to reinforce our vital infrastructure and to protect our utilities. Flood defenses have been constructed and measures are being taken to minimize coastal erosion.

Perhaps the most innovative adaptation measure is the development of the “safe-island” concept. This initiative is designed to enhance our safety from climate change impacts and natural disasters by resettling communities from smaller islands that are more vulnerable onto larger and better protected ones. This enables the government to concentrate our limited resources on protecting the more viable islands. It also allows for the strengthening of public services, development of

economic opportunities, and securing vital transport and communications infrastructure.

Domestic adaptation involves significant engineering projects and large financial investments. It also demands that we build our institutional capacity and prepare our people for the inevitable changes. We cannot undertake such costly ventures alone. We will need your expertise and financial support.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

2008 is a year of important anniversaries.

In 1938 a British engineer, Guy Steward Callendar, delivered a speech in London in which he argued that the climate was changing and that emissions of CO₂ by human industry were principally to blame. Seven decades passed before the world was willing to accept the science of climate change.

In 1988 scientist James Hanssen of the National Aeronautic and Space Administration announced to Congress and the World that “Global Warming has begun”. Almost one year earlier the President of the Maldives, His Excellency Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, had become the first world leader to stand before the

United Nations General Assembly and say that climate change would result in the death of his nation and others like it.

Two decades have now passed and we are still waiting patiently on the politics to meet the challenges set by the science. We believe that it is therefore vital for us to change the nature of our conversation on climate change.

For too long global warming has been about environmental impacts. In 2008 we need to concentrate on the human dimensions of climate change. We believe that as the scale of the human costs emerge, the public will demand action and the politics will respond. The government of the Maldives has therefore launched a process at the UN in Geneva that examines the link between climate change and human rights. More broadly we are pursuing a global program of public diplomacy that aims to put people back at the heart of the climate debate.

This years' most important landmark is the 60th anniversary of the signing of the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights. When delegates gathered in Paris in December 1948 they resolved to learn the lessons of an unprecedented human tragedy. While the horrors of the Second World War were the results of the worst instincts in human nature, the scale of the tragedy was in part due to the inactivity of those who stood by and watched as opportunities to avert disaster came and went.

The devastating impacts of global climate change have come. They have come first for the Maldives and other Small Island States. They have come first for the poor, the vulnerable and the voiceless. Will you speak up with us? Will you raise your voice? Or will you wait until there is no-one left to speak for you?

Thank you and good luck to us all