

Address by Ambassador Guðni Bragason at the meeting of the Indo-Icelandic Business Association (IIBA), New Delhi 24th September 2021.

Chairman of the Indo-Icelandic Business Association, ladies and Gentlemen, dear friends.

Dear Prasoon, I thank you for your kind welcoming words and the invitation to address this meeting. It is a great honor and pleasure for me to meet the membership of the Business Association. I am especially pleased with the timing of this event, since it coincides with my deliverance of my Letter of Credence to the President of India, His Excellency, Ram Nath Kovind. I conveyed to the President the greetings of the President of Iceland and his wife, who recall with fondness the official visit of the Indian Presidential couple to Iceland in September in 2019. It is my hope that the Icelandic President will be able to visit India in the future.

It is for me a great honor and pleasure to have been nominated Ambassador of my country to the Republic of India. In the coming year, 2022, we will celebrate fifty years of diplomatic relations. This anniversary gives a good opportunity to highlight the issues and ideals we have in common, such as emphasis on security, democracy and human rights, sustainable development and sustainable use of natural resources, free market economy, and draw attention, through events and cultural exchange, to our good relations.

Ladies and Gentlemen.

This week also marks the beginning of the 76th General Assembly of the United Nations. India has been in the leading role of the organization for decades and was admirably chairing the Security Council in August, dealing with many difficult issues, such as the situation in Afghanistan. Needless to say, Iceland has for a long time supported the idea of a Permanent Seat of India in the Security Council.

I like to use this opportunity to say few words on security matters. Iceland's NATO membership and the bilateral defense agreement with the United States remain key pillars of our security and foreign policy. Changes in the security landscape demand a constant vigilance in the defense of democracy, human rights and free speech. New threats have emerged, and we need to build capabilities in the field of cyber-security and to strengthen responses to hybrid threats. Security is, however, a global issue that demands an active international cooperation, such as within the United Nations and their organizations. The world's democracies need to work together in defense of free election processes, free media and free market economy.

The security situation in this part of the world, such as in Afghanistan, is also of concern to the Icelanders and deserves the full attention of the international community. In the last weeks Iceland has committed funds to UN agencies for Afghanistan. I am familiar with the situation

in Afghanistan through my previous work as a Director for the MFA peace-keeping department which was, among other projects, providing gender training in Afghanistan. Now, we fear for the rights of women and human rights in general in the country.

Our Foreign Minister will address the UN General Assembly in the coming week. Within the UN, Iceland has been a vigorous advocate for the rule of law, human rights and equality, as demonstrated by our previous membership in the Human Rights Council which has encouraged us to seek a seat again for the years 2025 - 2027. Iceland supports universal human rights, based on the UN Charter, including gender equality and the rights of the LGBTI persons.

Ladies and Gentlemen.

We have been involved in the preparations for the UN High Level Dialogue on Energy, taking place today (24th September 2021), and we are committed to the clean energy transition. We advocate making food systems more sustainable through renewable energy, - such as geothermal energy - in the production, processing, and value addition of food – be it fisheries, aquaculture, and agriculture, as well as minimizing waste in the value chain.

Ladies and Gentlemen.

Iceland is a staunch advocate of free trade which is the foundation of prosperity in our country and an important emphasis in our foreign policy. Free Trade Agreements open up markets for our companies, and vice versa. Recently Iceland, together with Liechtenstein and Norway, our partners in the European Economic Area (EEA) concluded a new Free Trade Agreement with the United Kingdom as a follow up to Brexit. Through the membership of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) and bilaterally, Iceland has made free trade agreements with 75 countries. Free trade negotiations have been conducted between the EFTA-countries and India for more than ten years and we hope that an agreement will be concluded as soon as possible.

This summer Iceland concluded its Chairmanship of the Arctic Council which is the leading intergovernmental forum in the High North. We appreciate India's interest in Arctic issues and climate issues as such, and value the observer status of India in the Arctic Council. We support the discussion on the so-called Third Pole/Hindu-Kush-Himalaya, and cooperation with the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development, ICIMOD, headquarters in Nepal. As with the Arctic region, the Hindu Kush/Himalaya region might experience profound ecological transformations as a result of climate change.

Ladies and Gentlemen.

The Ministry for Foreign Affairs supports the work of the Business Iceland agency (before Promote Iceland) and increased collaboration with the business sector. Together we are focusing on six areas; geothermal cooperation, innovation and new technology, creative arts and culture, tourism and travel, fisheries and specialized products and nature products.

Although the COVID-19 situation has brought to a stand-still some commercial enterprises, we encourage businessmen and women to start planning for the future. For that purpose the cooperation within the Iceland - India Business Council in Reykjavík is of great importance, as well as the Indo - Icelandic Business Association here in India.

The MFA and Business Iceland have set up some mechanisms to support the financing of economic development in other countries, such as a MFA Business Partnership Fund for the advancement of the UN Global Goals. Incidentally, this year an Indian-Icelandic project in the field of geothermal energy and food security received a grant (ISK 30 million) from the Fund. The idea is to use a steam-powered cold room for the storage of fruit. The project, which is to be completed by the end of 2023, is a welcome addition to the on-going geothermal cooperation project in Ladakh.

It is also worthwhile mentioning that the MFA-supported development training programmes have been strengthened under the auspices of UNESCO. The four training programmes are the in the field of Fisheries, Gender Equality, Geothermal cooperation and Land Restoration.

Ladies and Gentlemen.

Our countries, and indeed the whole world, have been facing enormous challenges in the last months through the COVID-19 pandemic. Allow me though to say that it shows the strength our societies and culture that we have been able to live up to these challenges, and that we will over-come them. It is my intention to do everything in my capacity to strengthen and foster the friendly relations between our countries.

Thank you.