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Statement  
by  
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**Agenda item 52 (a) and (b)**  
**Oceans and the Law of the Sea**

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At the outset I would like to commend the Secretariat, in particular the very able staff of the Division for Ocean Affairs and the Law of the Sea, for their comprehensive report on oceans and the law of the sea. Let me also congratulate the coordinators, Ms. Elana Geddis of New Zealand and Mr. Colin McIff of the United States, for their professional conduct of the informal consultations on the two resolutions.

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Last year we commemorated the 20th anniversary of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. We welcome that in the last twelve months the Convention has been ratified by seven States, bringing the total number of States Parties up to 145, and urge those States that still have not ratified the Convention to do so in order to achieve the ultimate goal of universal participation. The Law of the Sea Convention provides the legal framework for all our deliberations on ocean affairs. It is imperative that the Convention be fully implemented and its integrity preserved.

We note with satisfaction that the three institutions established under the Law of the Sea Convention are functioning well. The Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf has already received and dealt with the first submission from a coastal State regarding the establishment of the outer limits of the continental shelf beyond 200 nautical miles. Iceland is now in the process of preparing its submission to the Commission and follows its work with special interest.

In that context, I am pleased to report that last June the Law of the Sea Institute of Iceland and the Center for Oceans Law and Policy of the University of Virginia School of Law co-hosted a Conference on Legal and Scientific Aspects of Continental Shelf Limits in Reykjavik. It is our sincere hope that this Conference, attended by 170 legal and scientific experts from fifty countries, has contributed to a deeper understanding of some of the key issues arising from the application of article 76 of the Convention, thus facilitating preparation of submissions by coastal States to the Commission. The proceedings of the Conference will be published early next year.

The Agreement on Straddling Fish Stocks and Highly Migratory Fish Stocks is of paramount importance, as it provides the framework for conservation and management of those stocks by regional fisheries management organizations. The provisions of the Agreement in many ways strengthen the relevant provisions of the Law of the Sea Convention and some of the provisions represent development of international law in this area. However, the effectiveness of the Agreement depends on its wide ratification and implementation and we encourage those States that have not ratified the Agreement to do so.

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Ocean issues continue to be the subject of growing attention in the General Assembly, as witnessed, for example, by the informal consultative process on oceans and the law of the sea. This is hardly surprising, as we have increasingly come to

appreciate that the ocean is the very cornerstone of our life-support system on this planet.

The World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg confirmed the global importance of the marine environment. The section on oceans and coasts in the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation illustrates how far the international community has come in dealing with this issue. We are pleased to note that the Global Forum on Oceans, Coasts and Islands, set up in Johannesburg to mobilize support for oceanic issues at the Johannesburg Summit, concluded in Paris earlier this month a most successful conference on how best to facilitate and promote the implementation of commitments made.

Through the Johannesburg Plan, we have been given an important policy direction, including objectives and targets for sustainable fisheries, application of the ecosystem approach, reduction of land-based pollution and the improvement of scientific understanding and assessment of marine and coastal ecosystems as a basis for sound decision-making.

Following the Reykjavik Declaration on the ecosystem approach, my Government has begun to integrate this approach into the management of Iceland's living marine resources, applying, among other things, a multi-stock model where possible. We are actively taking part in efforts, spearheaded by the FAO, to contain and eliminate IUU fishing. We are also actively supporting endeavors to diminish the overcapacity of the world's fishing fleets, a principal contributor of overexploitation and depletion of fish stocks in many regions.

The world community does not lack the tools to ensure the conservation and sustainable management of living marine resources. The Law of the Sea Convention, the Agreement on Straddling Fish Stocks and Highly Migratory Fish Stocks, Chapter 17 of Agenda 21, the FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries and the Convention on Biological Diversity all exemplify such tools, providing countries of the world with the means to develop their fisheries management systems in a sustainable manner. While global instruments are often called for, we should bear in mind that the responsible management of the living resources of the sea is best carried out at the local and regional level, in partnership with those who are closest to and depend on the resources for their livelihood.

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In the context of the regional implementation of the Johannesburg commitments, allow me to speak for a few moments in my capacity as Chairman of the Senior Arctic Officials of the Arctic Council, where Iceland currently holds the Chairmanship.

The Arctic is predominantly a marine environment as the Arctic oceans cover approximately twenty thousand square kilometers - making them eight times bigger than the Mediterranean Ocean, for example. Focussing on all main pillars of sustainable development, the Arctic Council addresses issues related to the marine environment in a broad perspective, including biodiversity, pollution, shipping and utilization of resources like oil and gas.

As a regional organization, the Arctic Council can have an important role to play in the implementation of the commitments of the Johannesburg Summit. The Council provides, for example, regional coordination and cooperation to protect the Arctic marine environment from both land- and sea-based activities, through, among other things, the implementation of the United Nations Environment Programme's (UNEP) Global Programme of Action at the regional level. We are encouraged that the Commission on Sustainable Development has acknowledged the importance of regional bodies in the implementation of the Johannesburg Plan.

In the context of the Johannesburg commitments, I would like to draw particular attention to the Arctic Council's strategic plan for the protection of the Arctic marine environment, launched by Ministers one year ago. The new strategy is based on an integrated approach to sustainable ocean management and we are confident that this plan will contribute significantly to the fulfillment of targets set by the World Summit on Sustainable Development.

A three-day workshop hosted in Reykjavík last month, under the auspices of the Arctic Council, was an important milestone in this regard. The objective of the workshop was to provide a forum for exchanging information and ideas on the drivers of change and trends in ocean management.

The main drivers of change identified at the workshop include climate change and increased economic activity. Both call for an integrated, holistic approach. There was broad consensus that the ecosystem approach should be central to the Arctic marine strategy. At the same time, it was recognized that more work was needed to define how an ecosystem approach is to be implemented, given that this is a relatively new concept in natural resource management. In addition to the ecosystem approach, the precautionary approach and the polluter pays principle were referred to as important elements for consideration.

The aim of the Arctic strategic plan is to set priorities. Through it, we will not seek to reinvent principles, but to develop and link existing ones. Such a strategy should offer numerous opportunities. It will help us confront existing conditions, including pollution, and will provide a means to address new and emerging challenges. One example is the possible opening of new Arctic sea routes, due to melting sea ice.

The plan should enable the Arctic Council to take a leading role in the regional application of the ecosystem approach. An integrated approach would include partnerships with external partners and provide links to other international initiatives, such as the UNEP Regional Seas Program, the EU Marine Strategy and the London Convention.

Climate change is the subject of a major study being conducted by the Arctic Council, the so-called Arctic Climate Impact Assessment (ACIA). This will be the first comprehensive regionally based study of climate change to be published since the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. The ACIA, scheduled to be completed by next fall, will provide an overview and make possible an assessment of the future impact of climate change on the environment and its living

resources, on human health, and social and economic activities, in addition to guiding possible policy responses.

The sometimes daunting implications of climate change have begun to emerge. Some preliminary key findings of the ACIA reveal, for example, rising sea levels. This will in turn affect coastal communities, islands, river deltas and harbours. Sea ice reduction will also affect climate feedbacks, species migration and, in turn, subsistence lifestyles and human health. Furthermore, changes in the hydrological cycle may impact, for example, riverflow, leading, in certain cases, to higher floods or more severe droughts.

Climate change in the Arctic is not of local or regional nature only. It concerns the global community, including, in particular, small islands developing states that will bear some of the severest consequences of rising sea levels. Climatic and marine environmental issues must be viewed through a global prism. Through its work in those areas, the Arctic Council is confident that it can contribute to a better understanding of and a more effective response to some of the most demanding marine environmental challenges confronting the international community.

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Iceland has actively encouraged an open discussion on marine pollution, an issue of international concern. Pollution respects no boundaries and cannot be tackled successfully in the absence of global coordination. It has long been recognized that one of the most serious and extensive threats to the health of the marine ecosystem is pollution from land-based sources.

As the implementation of the Global Programme of Action to Protect the Marine Environment from Land-based Sources has fallen short of expectations, national or regional action plans should play a leading role in redressing this issue. Only a few countries have as yet adopted such action plans, but a number of countries are in the final stages of adopting their national action plans. However, more efforts are needed and Iceland strongly urges Governments that have not done so to develop their own plans of action based on sound scientific advice.

Efforts to strengthen international action to protect the oceans from land-based pollution and other man-induced threats have been hampered by the lack of information, readily accessible to policy-makers, on the state of the marine environment. The lack of a comprehensive overview is arguably one of the main reasons why measures to protect the marine environment have not been focusing on the real priority issues. Regular assessments, including socio-economic aspects, are needed as a basis for responsible decision-making. Iceland, supported by broad range of nations, has called for action to meet this need. We were delighted that this call was answered at the Johannesburg Summit last year.

Following the recommendation of the Summit, the General Assembly decided in its omnibus resolution last year, 57/141, to establish by 2004 a regular process under the United Nations for global reporting and assessment of the state of the marine environment, including socio-economic aspects. As is clear from the preamble

of resolution 57/141, the decision is based on article 200 of the Law of the Sea Convention.

The decision to establish this regular process acknowledges that international action is needed to protect the marine environment from land-based pollution or other human activity that causes pollution or the physical degradation of the ocean.

The information currently available is fragmented and the coherence and comparability of data often lacking. This is particularly the case as regards the socio-economic aspects. The regular assessment process is designed to remedy this situation by providing policy makers with accessible and authoritative information and advice.

The Government of Iceland has accepted the invitation to host the intergovernmental meeting to formally establish the regular process, as spelled out in operative paragraph 65 of this year's proposed omnibus resolution. The decision bears testimony to the great importance my Government attaches to this issue. A preliminary date for the intergovernmental meeting is 20-22 October 2004.

By way of conclusion, I will focus on the big picture: We are told that life began in the oceans some 2000 to 3000 million years ago. We are also informed that the earth is unique in our solar system, as no other planet has liquid water. This allows us to frame the subject of the agenda item before us, oceans and the law of the sea, in a helpful perspective. The oceans we have been given in trust are a precious gift and possibly exceptional in the universe as we know it. Let us therefore take care of them. As a former Judge at the International Court of Justice once put it: "Good planets are hard to find."