



MINISTRY FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS

The Permanent Mission of Iceland to the United Nations

**Statement by
H.E. Mr. Gunnar Bragi Sveinsson
Minister for Foreign Affairs and External
Trade**

*During the General Debate of the 68th Session of the United
Nations General Assembly*

New York
30 September 2013

Mr. President, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Once again we have witnessed outrageous acts of terrorism against innocent people, most recently in Kenya, Iraq and Pakistan. Our thoughts go out to the victims and their families.

It is the primary responsibility of all Governments to protect their citizens. A few weeks ago, the world witnessed the use of chemical weapons in Syria. It is hard to find words strong enough to express our condemnation. International law has been broken, war crimes committed and globally agreed values have been shattered.

Those responsible must be held accountable and should answer to the International Criminal Court.

The devastation brought on the Syrian people must end. A country is in ruins. Innocent lives are lost every day, more than six million people are displaced and stability in the region is threatened.

The Syrian Government has not lived up to its responsibility towards its own citizens. It has retaliated with aggressive violence instead of choosing a path of reform, reconciliation and improved rights for its people.

This crisis calls for firm action to be taken by the international community. Syria must comply with its international obligations and all parties to the conflict must respect humanitarian and human rights law.

We welcome the adoption of Security Council Resolution 2118 and call on the Council to ensure that Syria fully meets its commitments. The Geneva communique from last year must also be honoured and a Geneva II conference convened urgently.

The tragedy in Syria has once again underscored the fundamental importance of international law and order.

Some of the greatest achievements of the United Nations are in the field of international law. Within these walls, the history of international relations continues to be written and brave new steps to be taken.

The latest accomplishment is the adoption of the Arms Trade Treaty. Iceland is proud to be the first State to ratify this landmark Treaty. We call on all States - in particular arms exporters - to do so as well, so that it enters into force without delay.

Mr. President,

In the year 2000, world leaders gathered in this city and made a historic decision by adopting the Millennium Declaration.

Since then, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have served us well.

For almost fifteen years, they have influenced and guided the development priorities of nations and organizations. They have increased awareness of heartbreaking poverty and inspired new policy making.

The Millennium Development Goals are indeed central to Iceland's development policy and my Government is firmly committed to shouldering our responsibility in a globalized world.

As new goals are defined, the focus should remain on eliminating poverty, achieving gender equality, improving health and providing education for girls and boys.

The pressure on our ecosystem calls for urgent action to combat pollution and land degradation, as well as a balanced consideration of conservation and utilization of natural resources.

It is a challenge to ensure food security when land and water resources are threatened. Our duty is to share experiences and know-how to restore land and improve land management – to change deserts into blooming fields.

Climate change and disasters like the one in Fukushima have furthermore taught us that a real energy transformation is needed. Safe, clean and renewable energy is the way of the future.

Iceland has undergone a true energy revolution. Today, almost all our electricity and heating needs are met with renewable energy. This success story is a source for a productive partnership between Iceland and the United Nations, and now also the World Bank.

Mr. President,

Our world is wealthy. This wealth is not only preserved in the minerals of the earth, the power of the rivers or the rich living marine resources. Our greatest wealth is people - the knowledge, the experiences, the constant journey of the human mind to explore and invent new solutions.

Iceland makes use of these assets in its development cooperation.

We are proud to offer the world our expertise where it can make a real difference - for the development of geothermal energy, sustainable fisheries management, restoration of fertile land, and the promotion of gender equality.

More than 2500 experts from all parts of the world have benefited from the activities of the four UN University Training Programmes in Iceland since the first one was established 35 years ago.

Iceland will focus on those same four topics in the post-2015 process.

Let me emphasize that this process must be conducted in a true democratic spirit - it must be inclusive and allow for all Member States to participate.

Mr. President,

As I glance around this hall, I am inspired - inspired by the history and success of this organization which represents the immense diversity and talent of human kind - and inspired by the potential for future positive action that this rich fabric of delegates from all Member States represents.

But success should not blind our vision or daze our judgment. The flaws of the Security Council have been sadly exposed in the case of Syria. Furthermore, the lack of organizational reform undermines the credibility of the United Nations.

In so many areas much work remains undone.

As long as people are mistreated for their views, race and religion - and even cast as outlaws for their sexual orientation or gender identity - human rights obligations are not honoured.

We are alarmed that recent legislation in some countries is violating the fundamental principles of equality and freedom of expression.

The responsibility to change this, and ensure the protection and promotion of human rights, rests with us, politicians. By speaking from this podium, each and every one of us pledges to uphold these common values of the United Nations.

Mr. President,

The promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women is another urgent task.

In 2015, we will celebrate the 20th anniversary of the women's conference in Beijing. We call on all Member States to renew efforts to implement the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. Iceland has been advocating for celebrating the anniversary through a twelve-month campaign, focusing on each of the twelve themes of Beijing. We note that UN Women is planning its strategy along these lines.

A prominent element in the Beijing Declaration is the importance of active engagement of women for democratic development.

The women of the Arab world have given this objective a powerful new meaning in the last three years. Women assumed their rightful place, calling on their leaders to show real leadership.

They call for respect for human rights and equal treatment of women and men. They call for freedom to express their views and to determine their own future through democratic processes.

It is regrettable that developments in the region have been overshadowed by political discord and continued violence. We deplore the loss of lives and condemn all violence. We also call on the Governments in the region to demonstrate their commitment to democracy with concrete actions.

Mr. President,

The developments in the Middle East cannot be separated from the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. As President Obama said, the Palestinian people have a right to live with security and dignity in their own sovereign state. Israel's security depends upon the realization of a Palestinian State and stability will only be served through a two-State solution and a secure Israel. We welcome renewed peace talks between the State of Israel and the State of Palestine and applaud Secretary Kerry for his commitment in this regard.

We must respect the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination, as well as Israel's right to exist in peace with its neighbours.

But time is running out. The continuing settlement activities, in violation of international law, threaten to make the two-State solution impossible. Therefore, the Government of Israel must end all settlements in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem.

We denounce the oppressive policies of Hamas and condemn indiscriminate rocket fire from Gaza. We also call upon Israel to end the blockade of the territory.

Mr. President,

Respect for international law is fundamental for relations between States. If differences arise, we should always seek agreements through consultations, negotiations or other means for peaceful resolution.

The principle of the rule of law, which is among the founding principles of the United Nations, is vital to us all - big nations and small.

One international agreement that Iceland holds in high regard is the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. It was a great achievement when this important Convention was adopted thirty years ago and it has proved its relevance by the test of time.

The Law of the Sea Convention demonstrates how international order can best work and prescribes how differences should be settled through peaceful means.

The Convention provides a basis for sound resource management. However, meeting that objective is difficult for many States. The international community should do much more to support developing countries to better conserve and utilize their resources and reform their management policies.

As a steadfast advocate of the Convention, Iceland is firmly committed to its provisions. We protest in the strongest terms when stakeholders resort to threats of coercive measures when differences arise.

Mr. President,

Icelanders know better than anyone that the health of the ocean and its resources must be preserved. It is fundamental for our existence and livelihood.

Conservation, sound management and sustainable use of natural resources are principles that we follow strictly in our policies. We are sincere and serious in living up to the responsibility that comes with safeguarding the riches of the Earth.

For this same reason, the eight Arctic States have formed a productive regional cooperation. As the world witnesses the rapid changes in the Arctic, we who live in that corner of the world know how urgent it is to act and plan for the future. The delicate environment must be protected, economic opportunities developed and the needs of the people who live in the Arctic respected.

Mr. President,

As caretakers of the Arctic we take our global duty very seriously.

It was therefore a great pleasure and honour for me to host the Secretary-General of the United Nations in Iceland this summer.

During his visit, I demonstrated to him how the global impact of climate change melts the glaciers of the north. Following our trip to the central highlands, the Secretary-General observed that we had not only *seen* the ice disappear, we had also *heard* the most powerful sound of the ice melting away.

During his stay, the Secretary-General gave us Icelanders an insight into the work of the United Nations. How every single day the UN is making a difference in the lives of countless people around the world - helping refugees, providing humanitarian assistance and saving the lives of children.

The United Nations are a force for good in the world. Together we make a real difference, united we protect the environment, preserve peace and save lives. The more united we are, the better the world becomes.

Thank you Mr. President.