

**Statement by President James Michel of the Seychelles, September 25, 2008 at the 63rd Session of the United Nations**

**'The time for action is at hand'**

Mr President,

Distinguished Heads of State and Government,  
Mr Secretary-General, Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I have come to this gathering of nations as a representative of one of the smallest nations on the planet. Seychelles is but a speck on the globe, home to some 87,000 people, a people who believe in justice, freedom and fairness. In this concert of nations, every country – great or small – has a voice. Our voice comes from the heart of a people who, like countless others, live in trepidation. I have come here neither to beg nor to accuse but to reach out to the conscience of all who have gathered here at the United Nations. I ask you to feel the heartbeat of humanity.



When this great institution was founded over six decades ago, its architects were motivated by noble and just ideals: human freedom and dignity, justice, human rights, peace, security and harmony, development... These are values that we hold dear, timeless values that are the soul of the United Nations. I have faith in those values. So do the people of Seychelles. Have we lived up to those values?

Yes, we have averted many wars. We have resolved many conflicts. But in this age of relative peace and security, new enemies are staring us in the face. Hunger, pandemics, under-development, poverty, economic turmoil, environmental degradation, the iniquity of the global trading system... These are the enemies which, if not overcome, will shatter the foundation of civilisation.

These are the enemies that we have to battle and conquer to create a better world for our children and their children. These are the battles that we have to win to save our planet. These are the issues that the modern United Nations has to grapple with and overcome.

Can it succeed? I believe it can. It can if we endow it with a new vision:

- A vision in which hope for mankind goes beyond rhetoric.
- A vision which provides for bold leadership, clear commitments and targets so that we can focus on the greater good for humankind.
- A vision where leaders come together, setting aside petty differences and charting a new course for the UN, a new roadmap to resolve the climate crisis and an appropriate framework for the energy and food crisis.
- A vision where appropriate institutional reforms are put in place and adequate resources mobilised to achieve the Millennium Development Goals.

- A vision which encompasses justice and fairness in trade, and where the specificities of small island developing states are not only recognised but accepted as criteria for aid to further development...

Mr. President, Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,  
I believe in this vision. We can all share it; we can all help make it a reality. Our deeds have to be governed by firm commitments and perseverance to find sustainable, pragmatic and equitable solutions to these complex issues that threaten our very existence.

We should abandon “solutions” which continue to enrich the rich and impoverish the poor and the vulnerable.

When it comes to world trade, for example, it seems acceptable to some that wealthy countries are allowed to give subsidies to their farmers, as a result of which exports from developing countries become uncompetitive. Yet developing countries are obliged to follow WTO rules to the letter, even to the extent that they may undermine domestic economic policies formulated to protect vulnerable sections of society.

We offer facilities to foreign investors to exploit our natural resources, which are traded for high profits on the international market, while we receive a pittance as license fees. It is like taking a bowl of food from the poor and giving them back a spoonful as a generous donation!

For instance, of the total value of tuna – our “blue gold” – caught and transshipped in our waters by foreign fishing vessels every year, Seychelles receives only seven percent in revenue, comprising license and transshipment fees. This, to my mind, is unacceptable. I ask you, is it unreasonable to fight for a better share of the proceeds?

On a separate but related note, whilst the prevailing situation of insecurity in international waters off Somalia is of grave concern to the international community, it is of graver concern to Seychelles, whose Exclusive Economic Zone borders this maritime zone of hazard. A little more than a week ago, some forty European fishing vessels lay idle in Victoria as a result of an act of piracy on one of theirs. Such acts can seriously impact on the lifeline of the second pillar of our economy at a time when we are engaging with the Bretton Woods institutions in a process of economic reforms. I wish to thank all our partners and friends, in particular, France, for all efforts deployed against this scourge.

Mr. President,

The skewed nature of the global trade regime is not the only impediment to development.

I come back again to the case of my country. The fact that we have a high human development index, ranked 50th in the world, and that we fall in the middle-income group of countries, excludes us from access to grants and soft loans that would have helped our country develop even further and faster.

And this is despite the fact that donor organisations have confirmed that all aid, grants or loans, that were given to Seychelles have been properly and accountably utilised for the benefit of our people.

It is as if we are being penalised for our success in raising the standard of living of our people. We have fallen into the so called “middle-income” trap.

Furthermore, no account is taken of the fact that Seychelles falls into the category of Highly Vulnerable countries as defined by the Commonwealth Vulnerability Index.

Why should our relative success be the reason for being denied access to special development funds, especially those addressing education, water, sanitation and health? Is this the price to pay for improving the quality of life of our people? Is this the price to pay for dedicating over 50% of our territory to environmental conservation for the benefit of the whole world?

Our natural environment is our future, our treasure trove of bio-diversity. We attach the highest importance to its preservation, not only for ourselves, but also for the rest of the world.

Like many other small island states, Seychelles remains vulnerable to the threats posed by global warming, climate change, and rising sea levels. These phenomena are linked to human activity on our planet, and which we, collectively as the nations of the world, have the power to influence, if only we had the will to do so.

It is not right that small island states have to run the risk of being submerged by rising sea levels, whilst some nations refuse to even acknowledge their responsibility for the high levels of environmental pollution which are now threatening the planet's resources.

Despite our small size, we shall continue to lead. And we shall lead by example. By our example, we have shown and will continue to show to all that sustainable development and the Millennium Development Goals are achievable in our present generation. By our effort and the support of international NGOs, we have started a global movement – the Global Island Partnership – to get all small islands and nations with islands to devote part of their natural resources to environment resilience and sustainability. And more recently, Seychelles set up the Sea Level Rise Foundation to galvanize global action to address the devastating impacts of climate change on our planet.

Are these worthy causes not deserving of international support, especially in the International Year of Planet Earth?

We are running out of time, and we must combine our resources and know-how to avoid the physical damage and social and economic toll that threaten us.

Mr. President, Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Some of the greatest afflictions of humankind today are hunger, starvation and malnutrition. Food security is today our foremost concern and the challenge for many governments is to bring food at affordable prices to ordinary people. The dramatic increase in grain prices has led to huge increases in the price of bread, milk, meat and other commodities. The hungry are getting hungrier, more desperate and angrier. The divide between rich and poor is widening by the day. We are faced with the looming threat of starvation on a global scale and, with it, the prospect of violent upheavals.

We can act to resolve the food crisis. In the first place, the political commitment has to be there. Secondly, subsidies that the industrialised countries give to their farmers have to be removed. Thirdly, the industrialised countries should make available to the South much needed resources to improve our infrastructure. Give us the resources, the technology and the infrastructure for us to produce more food, and you will not need to help us feed ourselves! Mankind has had a hand in all, if not most, of the crises we face today. We gather here every year in the name of freedom, human rights, democracy, sustainable development ... to deliver eloquent speeches. In the process, we procrastinate and bury solutions to our problems in reams of resolutions and declarations!

Can we honestly say that we have got our priorities right? Can we say that we live in a just world, where every man, woman and child enjoys the same rights? Are we, as leaders, living up to the

noble goals for which the United Nations was set up? Let our conscience provide us with the answer.

A revamped UN system is best placed to facilitate progress in all of the areas I have mentioned: food security, trade, climate change and energy... I am asking for a clear action plan. Multiple conferences and talk shops are not the solution. We need a fresh and effective approach to global governance and I am convinced that with the right level of resources, that with the political will and commitment, we can start to tackle those fundamental flaws in our global governance and trade regimes. I am asking the rich nations to support this endeavour and assume their collective global responsibility.

Let those of us who believe in freedom and dignity show solidarity amongst ourselves, let us help each other to overcome the obstacles in our path. Let us focus on a global vision for the betterment of every nation.

In conclusion, I leave you with this note of reflection:

“History to the defeated  
May say Alas  
But cannot help or pardon...”

Auden's words will define the future of humanity in terms of its history; the time for action is at hand. Change, or be redefined by history, like many of our past, great civilizations!

Thank you.