

THIRD UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE ON
THE LAW OF THE SEA
CARACAS, VENEZUELA

Statement to be made by Sir Albert Henry,
Prime Minister of the Cook Islands,
on 29 July 1974

Mr President,

I must first thank you, Mr President, very much indeed for affording me this opportunity to address this very distinguished Conference. I am very conscious of this privilege, particularly in view of the fact that a special arrangement has been made to allow me to be recognised by the Chair. Secondly I want to extend the same appreciation to the distinguished members of this Conference.

Thirdly I must express my gratitude to the Government of New Zealand which has assisted in so many ways to ensure the interests of my country, the Cook Islands, are recognised and protected. Fourthly I wish very much, Mr President, to congratulate our host country for the extremely fine venue for this Conference and the efficient and pleasant organisation which I have met since my arrival in this magnificent city.

From my home in the tiny islands in the huge Pacific Ocean, remote by many hundreds of miles from any neighbours I have followed as best I could with deep interest the progress that has been made that has led to this great Conference. In my remote corner I have wondered at the influence and strength of the forces that brought this Conference into being, a Conference that could settle a new order in the world and in relationships between states. I have been impressed by the consideration being given to developing states. But at the same time I have worried whether the circumstances of small developing South Pacific island countries such as mine have been known and fully appreciated by those who have the influence and strength to decide the matters before this Conference. It is because of this

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worry, this uncertainty I have, that I have left my tiny and remote, but beautiful, homeland to cross the world to briefly place before distinguished delegates the reasons leading to my concern.

The Cook Islands consists of 15 small islands scattered over the South Pacific ocean to the east of Fiji, Western Samoa and Tonga, to the west of French Polynesia, to the far south of the Hawaiian Islands and to the far north east of New Zealand. The total land area of the Cook Islands is a mere 93 square miles and the population 22,000. In 1965 under the auspices and with the approval of the United Nations the Cook Islands exercised its right of self-determination and became self-governing. Prior to that time the Cook Islands had been administered by New Zealand. In becoming self-governing in 1965 the Cook Islands chose to continue a free association with New Zealand. That arrangement provided that New Zealand would continue to have responsibility for the external affairs and defence of the Cook Islands, which responsibility would be discharged only in consultation with the Cook Islands, and provided further that the Cook Islands by its own act, unilaterally, could alter that arrangement. I believe that this arrangement adopted by the Cook Islands was an ideal course for a small country such as mine to take. After nearly ten years of self-government my Government is presently considering whether to take further steps towards full and complete independence, but I wish to emphasise, Mr President, that the present position of the Cook Islands with regard to the matters before this Conference should not differ in any way under the present status of self-government in free association with New Zealand than if the Cook Islands were a fully independent sovereign state. I wish to repeat that the act of self-determination by the Cook Islands was made under the direct auspices of the United Nations and approved by that great body. My country should not be prejudiced in any way by its free choice of a status less than that of a sovereign state. We are proud to be self-governing in an association with New Zealand which is entirely free. I would like to stress the point that we are not under anyone's domination or control. Accordingly, Mr President, the Cook Islands should have the same benefits as sovereign states with regard to matters before this Conference and particularly with regard to the economic zone.

Mr President, I would like to discuss features of the Cook Islands which are common to some of our neighbours in the South Pacific and which are relevant to the position taken by the Cook Islands. I have heard of the term "geographically disadvantaged states". To me the term is a new one, but its meaning is not new. But I confess I had not thought of the meaning as applying to countries other than ones such as the Cook Islands. The greatest drawback to the development of the Cook Islands has been its geographic position: a group of tiny islands scattered over the huge Pacific Ocean, remote and isolated. Communications and transportation are very difficult and very expensive. Even today we have no direct communication or transportation between ourselves and some of our neighbours, for example, Western Samoa. This makes trading and the development of our economy extremely difficult. Our land mass is small and we have not been blessed with minerals or similar products which can be commercially used to develop our economy.

The sea, Mr President, represents as much to the people of small Pacific islands as the land. This is particularly so in islands of coral atoll formation where indeed there is very little soil. The vegetation on some of these atolls is very, very small. The sea yields therefore not only the only source of protein to be obtained from these islands but also almost the bulk of food. Approximately half the islands of the Cook Islands are such atolls. The principal island, Rarotonga, is fortunately volcanic in origin and about one-fifth of its area contains good arable land. The people of our islands live with the sea from their earliest days. Fish, shell fish, types of sea-weed, are everyday foods; pearl shell and fish provide a cash income. The sea provides a means of travel and transportation, and it features as a major aspect in our customs and traditions and proud heritage of explorers and navigators.

The Government of the Cook Islands realises that in the future the sea could become a dominant factor in the development of the Cook Islands economy. The Cook Islands is proud of what has been achieved since self-government in 1965. Despite a significant increase in the amount of my Government's budget the reliance on external aid has decreased from approximately 80 percent in 1965 to approximately 40 percent now. But we are faced with certain very difficult

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problems. With the right of free entry into New Zealand over the years the Cook Islands has lost a substantial part of its population - almost 14,000 Cook Islanders now live permanently in New Zealand apart from the 22,000 still living in the Cook Islands. To keep our population and to attract our people back from other countries we must strengthen our economy and broaden our economic base. The sea, perhaps, represents our only real chance to do this.

We have recently embarked upon a commercial fishing industry. This is on a small scale now and we have a long way to go to even meet the demand within our islands before we could possibly consider the sale of our fish overseas. With virtually no continental shelf whatsoever the feeding grounds and consequently the density of our fish is relatively limited.

With the advance in technology the discovery and extraction of minerals from the seabed around our islands may become a possibility. In the event of that possibility becoming a reality it would be only fair and just for the Cook Islands to receive the benefits from the seabed immediately around its islands. With many hundreds of miles separating the Cook Islands from its nearest neighbours a broad economic zone of 200 miles around each island would not present any significant problems with our neighbours. Isolation in this case may at least carry some benefits. The Cook Islands acknowledges that it may not qualify as an archipelagic island state. However an economic zone of 200 miles around each island would embrace the areas between one island and another. The Cook Islands strongly supports the concept of such an economic zone.

From the brief description of the Cook Islands I have given it should go without saying that the Cook Islands considers that it would be unfair and inequitable to limit the size of its economic zone by reference to land mass or population. Both of these factors when applied to the Cook Islands are extremely small by world standards. Yet the Cook Islands has been recognised as a self-governing country by the United Nations and on the principles of that great body claims treatment as the equal of much larger countries. It may well be, Mr President, that special attention should be given to small island countries such as those in the South Pacific and, Mr President, if that

is necessary to ensure full recognition of the positions of these island countries I invite this Conference to do so. My plea for recognition of small island countries goes out also on behalf of my neighbours in the Pacific including some who are not directly represented here at this Conference. Some have already embarked upon a smooth course to self-government, others face special difficulties. The peoples of these countries have a dependence on the sea similar to ours. It does not seem fair or equitable to me, Mr President, that they should suffer the double burden of being deprived of the full benefits of an economic zone.

May I add in conclusion that my visit here has given me a deeper appreciation of the problems of other countries. Some of those problems are as pressing as those of my own country. I have in mind in particular those countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America who suffer from both poverty and inadequate access to the sea. These problems, too, deserve special consideration and I very much hope that ways and means will be found to ensure that these countries receive a fair share of the resources of the oceans.

Mr President, I must thank you again for giving me the opportunity to speak. Kia Orana.
