

Arctic Circle
10. október 2019
Ræða Katrínar Jakobsdóttur forsætisráðherra

Chairman of the Arctic Circle, Mr. Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, former President of Iceland,

Excellencies, distinguished guests,

It is an honour to be here with you today.

The Arctic Circle Assembly has become a vital forum for a joint reflection on the state of the Arctic. This is a venue for constructive dialogue between the diverse actors that shape the region.

Iceland has consistently called for a peaceful and cooperative regime in the Arctic. Increased geopolitical tensions in the region is a deplorable development and highlights the fact that there is no specific Arctic forum to deal with hard security, territorial disputes or the exploitation of natural resources. It is our collective responsibility to ensure peace and stability in the North Atlantic and the Arctic, preventing the area from falling prey to misguided geopolitical wrestling.

Throughout this year's chairmanship of the Arctic Council, Iceland has worked towards strengthening it as the main intergovernmental forum on Arctic affairs. We have put focus on green solutions in the area, people and communities of the Arctic, and the Arctic marine environment.

IPCC's latest report on the ocean and the cryosphere reveals that climate change is progressing even faster than previously anticipated. The report highlights the challenges of rising sea temperatures and the melting of ice, both of which have severe consequences for the Arctic.

The oceans absorb around a quarter of carbon emissions and soak up 90% of excess heat. Sea ice is receding – rapidly here in the north. Ecosystems move towards the poles with warming trends, affecting fisheries and livelihoods. With over 2 degrees of global warming, the Arctic as we know it will change beyond recognition.

Simultaneously, ocean acidification is a real and serious threat to marine life, rendering coastal communities, including Iceland, extremely vulnerable. Cold

polar waters acidify more quickly and some of the most rapid trends in the world have been measured north of Iceland. Acidification will not be halted without significantly curbing carbon emissions. There is no alternative solution.

A couple of months ago, I joined an international group of artists and scientists – along with Mary Robinson, former President of Ireland and fierce campaigner for climate justice – to bid farewell to now the former glacier, Ok. The ice field that covered the mountain in 1900 has now been replaced by a crater lake. It is certainly beautiful, but that beauty quickly fades in the eyes of anyone who knows what was there before and why it is no longer there.

Glaciers are melting across the world, contributing enormously to rising sea levels and disrupting natural systems. Himalayan glaciers help regulate the water supply of a quarter of humankind, to take one example. The melting of ice sheets in Greenland and Antarctica would result in dozens of feet of sea-level rise. Scientists cannot pinpoint at what level the melting of Greenland or the West Antarctica ice sheets becomes irreversible. But it **will** become irreversible, unless we do something about it.

The fact that the Arctic is warming at a rate of almost twice the global average should be alarming to all of us. Many of us here will live to see ice-free summers in the Arctic Ocean. Nature, ecosystems and communities will be transformed. And we cannot convene at the Arctic Circle without taking notice.

I applaud the leadership of Mayors and elected leaders from northern local governments that earlier today founded the Arctic Mayors' Forum. The Forum will offer a platform for Arctic local communities to be formally involved in policy decision making regarding the area. I also hope that the mayoral collaboration contributes to peace and stability in the Arctic. That should be in the shared interest of all stakeholders.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Young people have been demonstrating for months on end. Their movement is based on the findings and guidance of science, which should be an encouragement to all of us. We should listen carefully to the many groups of young people who skip school to strike for the climate, to the people who gather outside our Parliaments week after week, month after month. The politics need to take responsibility. The politics need to create sustainable societies. And we need to be aware that the wealthy countries have contributed the most to climate change, but tend to be most immune to its

effects. 100 companies are supposed to have been the source of more than 70% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions since the late 1980s.

Furthermore, as recently revealed, 20 fossil fuel companies can be directly linked to more than one-third of all greenhouse gas emission in the modern world. Twelve of these companies are state-owned.

The world's largest companies need to take responsibility. Individualised policies to halt climate change – individuals trying to eat less red meat, use the bicycle or choose an electric vehicle – are important, but not sufficient against a problem facing humanity as a whole.

It is our task to change that. We need to build green wellbeing economies that work for the health of the planet and the long-term well-being of all people, as well as future generations.

Last month I addressed the Climate Action Summit, convened by the UN Secretary-General, António Guterres. The summit built a momentum, most notably on carbon neutrality and nature-based solutions. It also triggered significant new commitments. Climate change will only be confronted with robust action and generous international collaboration.

My government has adopted fully-funded action plan on climate change, aiming at carbon neutrality in Iceland by 2040. The national government and the municipalities in the greater Reykjavík area have agreed on a transport infrastructure investment plan of an unprecedented scale, aimed at lowering the carbon footprint of ground transport in the Capital area. Also the government is heading for energy shift in the whole transport system in Iceland. We have also scaled up investment in Nature-based solutions aimed at restoring soil, forest and wetland ecosystems and to enhance their carbon storage capacity. The government has also initiated a joint platform of cooperation with the private sector on Climate change and green solutions.

The Nordic Prime Ministers have agreed on a Declaration on Nordic Climate Neutrality, paving the way for further international commitment to halt climate change. We took that pledge forward in our meeting here in Iceland last August, jointly with the German Chancellor Angela Merkel. Our August meeting also saw a collaboration with Nordic CEOs, who pledged concerted action to tackle climate change.

This is to remind us that while governments and international organisations play a vital part in halting climate change, businesses need to step up as well.

Dear guests,

This room is full of hope and concerns for the future of the Arctic. We represent different interests, different politics, different ideas. But we should all be united in the will to protect the Arctic and provide a sustainable future for the local populations in the area, as well as for our ecosystems. The task is massive, but the solutions exist, it is ours to get the job done. And we need to inspire hope. Because hope is needed.

I wish you good and constructive conversations in the coming days.

Thank you.