

Opnun 5. samningafundar um fiskveiðistjórnun á N-Íshafi

Safnahúsinu, Reykjavík 15. mars 2017

Ræða Guðlaugs Þórs Þórðarsonar utanríkisráðherra

Good morning ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to Iceland. I am pleased to address you before you start your meetings.

First, a few words on this house where we are gathered, called „Safnahúsið“. It was constructed in 1908 as a National Library and was, at the time, one of the largest and finest buildings in Iceland. The Danish architect had foreseen using dolerite - basically a rock like you see in the House of Parliament and a shining copper roof. In those days, however, it was considered more prudent and economical to opt for concrete and iron. The outcome is no less impressive in my view.

We use this house sparingly and only for good visitors and important meetings. When you entered the building this morning, you may have noticed the coat of arms above the entrance, a white falcon on a blue shield and a crown. This was our coat of arms at the time when Iceland was still under the Danish Crown. Later it was replaced with coat of arms more similar to what we have now - a shield with the Icelandic flag, carried by no less than the four guardian spirits of Iceland, which are described in Heimskringla: a dragon, a vulture, a bull and a giant – one for each corner of the country. One bird was clearly not considered enough for a country, which was on its way to independence.

Distinguished negotiators,

You have an important task ahead in the coming days. Hardly a day goes by without news about the consequences of climate change in the Arctic. It is really not that long ago that we would imagine the Arctic as a tranquil vast area, covered with thick sheet of ice, healthy ecosystem, unaccessable, dark in the winter and light in the summer.

This picture is rapidly changing. Climate change in the Arctic is real and occurring at a rapid pace and the effects of climate change, I think we all agree, is one of the greatest threats to the ocean today. Scientists tell us that the Arctic sea ice was the lowest for the month of February in records going back almost half a century. In fact, we might see an ice-free summer in the Arctic around the middle of this century. Increased acidification of the ocean is also a great concern. Our scientistists have measured the ocean north of Iceland for the last 30 years and note a considerable difference. The ice sheet in the Arctic is melting fast. Vast oceans that have been covered with ice for the last 100.000 years at least, are becoming ice free.

What will this entail? So far, we don't know for sure. We know that we have to cut greenhouse gas emission. But there is more that needs to be done. We have to ensure that we build up adequate knowledge of the Arctic, and base all our decisions on science.

As for the subject of these negotiations, fisheries, although no commercial fisheries is possible for the moment in the Arctic high seas, there is already strong evidence that changes are, indeed, taking place in fish stocks and distribution due to warming of the sea. I can mention here the mackerel as an example of a fish, which has markedly changed its migration patterns towards colder waters in north. Some 1.5 million tonnes of mackerel have regularly visited our exclusive economic zone in recent years.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Iceland is a coastal state and for the last century or so fishing has been the backbone of our economy. The fishing industry has been the foundation of the country's progress and economic growth, and healthy marine ecosystem has always been a top priority for Iceland. Our life and well-being depends on it. The key words in our resource management are: science-based and sustainable.

This approach has served us for decades and therefore we can only fully support cooperation in the Arctic High Seas on building knowledge through science before any decisions are made on fisheries. What is quite remarkable for these negotiations is the fact that they revolve around a scenario, which we hope will never occur, namely an ice-free Arctic. The countries gathered here are demonstrating high degree of leadership and responsibility.

Finally, I am greatly encouraged to see all these parties gathered here, committed to cooperate and to take measures to prevent unregulated commercial high seas fishing in the central Arctic Ocean.

I wish you productive, successful and enjoyable days ahead. And despite your busy schedule, which I understand extends until Saturday, I hope that you will also have the chance to enjoy some parts of Iceland or, at least, the vibrant city of Reykjavík.

I wish you all the best. Thank you.