

APRC 35 CONFERENCE

Statement from Maldives - Ms. Zaha Waheed (Minister of Fisheries, Marine Resources and Agriculture)

Hon Chair, Distinguished delegates and Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the Government of Maldives, I would like to thank the FAO for the opportunity to address the 35th Session of the FAO Regional Conference for Asia and the Pacific. Please allow me to offer my congratulations to the FAO and Royal Government of Bhutan for organizing this important event virtually during a very challenging time for all member countries.

Similar to many countries in the region, Maldives is also in the midst of battling the challenges that has ravaged the country. Since the first community reported case on the 15th of April 2020 in our capital city, Male', the Greater Male' Region has become the epicenter of the outbreak. In order to contain further spread of Covid-19, the Government of Maldives placed strict measures by declaring a curfew and subsequently a lockdown. Travel bans were imposed as well as closing government offices, schools and eateries. The easing of the lockdown began towards the end of May 2020, and every effort is made by the Government to resume life into the "new normal".

Hon Chair, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen.

Fisheries and Agriculture are not only the backbone of our economy, but also vital in sustaining the lives of our communities.

Surrounded by the ocean, the fisheries sector is a significant contributor in bringing in foreign cash flow to our economy. It is disheartening to see a decline in fish export by 46% since March of 2020. This is mostly due to the fact that the demand for fresh fish exports have greatly reduced in the export markets around the world.

In order to alleviate the impacts of the pandemic on the fisheries sector, the Government of Maldives allocated MVR 100 Million that targets the fish exporting businesses to meet the working capital requirements. Other industry players are supported by relief packages. Furthermore, His Excellency President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih has announced the work on the development of an 800-tonne fish storage facility to improve the storage capacity and to reduce the impact of the supply chain.

The resilience of our fishermen is nothing short of remarkable; as our fishermen continue to go fishing in the open waters even during this trying time. With the devoted assistance of Male' City Council and the local Island Councils, the sales and distribution of the fish were facilitated within the Greater Male' Region. The fisheries sector is also the main domestic food supplier of

the country, as fish is an important part of our diet. Therefore, it is inspiring to note that the large fish processing businesses also actively participated in meeting the country's demand for fish.

Honorable Chair, Distinguished Delegates Ladies and Gentlemen,

As a country that imports over 90% of our food supplies, this pandemic has shone a stark light on the fact that we must be mindful of the status of food security in the country. The agricultural sector of the Maldives must overcome serious challenges in order to achieve sustainable local production. Due to the geographical makeup, transportation and travel challenge the availability of inputs and produce within the country. However, farmers and home gardeners play a vital role in food security and income generation.

Similar to our fishermen, our farmers have also been active and continued production throughout the lockdown period. In support of the efforts, the Government placed great importance in reviving the agriculture by providing various incentives. One major incentive is the dedication of 44 islands in the Maldives towards contract farming, with 17 crops identified for food security and to reduce import substitution. Moreover, a platform has now been provided for farmers to sell their produce and inputs through Agro-National Corporation Pvt Ltd, a state-owned enterprise formed during the initial period of the pandemic and lockdown. Initiation of Urban Gardening Programs and deferred annual lease payments for contract farmers in the dedicated agricultural islands are some additional incentives towards the revival of the agricultural sector.

Many efforts were made by the Government to continue the food supply chain without disruption and to avoid food shortages within the country. Special food import arrangements, with the support of the regional countries, were established. I would like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to the countries that lent a helping hand during this very strenuous period.

I would also like to offer my appreciation to the FAO, especially the FAO Representative in Sri Lanka and Maldives Dr Sun Xuebing, for working with my team to formulate projects to strengthen national capacity of agriculture extension and to introduce new high yielding varieties of traditional crops in response to the pandemic.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Before I conclude, I would like to reiterate on a subject that we have been communicating with FAO for the past several years. I would like to, once again, invite FAO permanent representation in United Nations team based in the Maldives to support the food security targets of the current Administration. I look forward for the FAO leadership to deliberate on the points of vulnerabilities in achieving food security within the Maldives and to plan more close collaborations on the ground.

Thank you.