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Global Roundtable with His Excellency Ambassador Sareer of the Permanent Mission of Maldives to the United Nations

N: Welcome to the Global Round Table organized by Global Foundation for Democracy and Development. Today we have the pleasure of the company of Mr. Ambassador Ahmed Sareer, Permanent Representative of the Republic of Maldives to the United Nations. Welcome Mr. Ambassador.

It's a pleasure to have you here today with us. Before we start our conversation, I would like to introduce your beautiful, stunning country to our audiences. The Republic of Maldives comprises 1,190 islands and 20 atolls spread over 900 km in the Indian ocean. Of these just 199 islands are inhabited with the population of slightly over 300,000 people. Occupying about 116 sq. miles, Maldives is slightly more than 1,5 times the size of Washington D.C. The environmental challenges that the Republic of Maldives faces include global warming and rising ocean levels. Rising ocean levels threaten the entire existence of the Maldives and its population of 339,000 citizens. In turn, the ocean also threatens the habitat of every human, and land animal in the country, rendering the country extremely vulnerable to habitat, biodiversity and species loss. Along with rising sea levels, increased beach erosion, more powerful storms, higher storm surges, depletion of fresh water aquifers, threatened water supplies, and among the major threats that the Maldives faces due to climate change over the coming decade. In terms of economic challenges, nature based tourism, the Maldives' largest economic activity accounts for 70% of GDP. Fishing is the second leading sector but the fish catch has dropped sharply in recent years. Agriculture and manufacturing continue to play a lesser role in the economy, constrained by the limited availability of cultivatable land with only 10% of arable land and the shortage of domestic labor.

Mr. Ambassador, we would also like to say a few words about you, so our audiences become more familiar with your work. You've been in the diplomatic career since 1986 and have served your country in relationship with a number of countries, like Sri Lanka, Kathmandu, you were in Brussels, London and Bangladesh. So you have had a varied and rich diplomatic career. And now recently from 2012 here, in New York, at the United Nations. So we tried to summarize a little bit and acquaint our audiences with the Maldives. But I would like to hear in your own words, what do you feel that the Maldives is facing now as a biggest threat and challenge?

S: Thank you very much. First of all, I'd like to thank you for having me here and I also wish to say words of appreciation for the work you have been doing. GFDD has been an enormous amount of good work for the concerns that we are having for small island states like the Maldives. And you have been raising a lot of these issues to the world which is quite commendable.

N: And the Dominican Republic is a member of the Association of Small Islands, so we share some common concerns.

S: Of course, of course. For the Maldives you have very rightly mentioned, it is a country of the oceans. The country is only a mere 1% of land territory, ...99% is oceans.

N: An ocean country.

S: It is an ocean country.

N: Not a land country.

S: Right in the middle of the Indian ocean 1,199 islands spread across such a large territory and it is in a way quite a lot of challenges in its governance, as well as to see how these issues that are confronting us especially in regard to climate change. We have been at a very forefront of climate change.

N: Your country doesn't have any doubts that there is climate change?

S: Well, I think people themselves have been seeing it every day. Every day they have to experience this. When we said that we have floods, that we have beach erosion, it is not a theory any more. People, the Maldivian people are facing this. And the frequency and intensity of it, that we have seen now is much more. As a child, I've never experienced those things in the Maldives. Obviously there is some change in the global climate which we see now. Now we are seeing almost every second month or so, or week we have some floods. When I mention floods, it is quite devastating to the island communities. We are having beach erosion, we are having ocean acidification, we are having issues with water, we are confronting with each and every issue that we are talking in the United Nations about climate change. And we have also from a very long time had these issues raised in the United Nations. In fact, the Maldives was among the first countries that raised this issue on the international stage and thanks to so many developing small island states got together in that formation which now we have a group as a negotiating bloc to talk about.

N: So in a way your country is like a "*canary in a mine*"

S: That's right.

N: And you are telling the rest of the world, "Watch out," because what's happening here, in our homes, in our country, on our land, is going to happen all across the world, if we don't do something.

S: That's right. You could say that the Maldives is a laboratory that you can see climate change aspects by the people and visitors, especially the country being exposed to tourism and so many international travellers that themselves see what we are talking about is true. So, if the Maldives

goes down, in this path of devastation and, it is not necessarily it is a little island state is going to be but also the bigger countries. The United States would have major devastation.

N: You mentioned acidification of the oceans. Like it seems like the three biggest threats to the oceans right now are acidification, pollution and overfishing. And all the countries in the world are feeling that. The Maldives – much more at this moment. You mentioned climate change and are there any measures that the Maldives are taking in sense of adaptation and mitigation? There are already some changes in the country. Have you been in the position to adopt some adaptation changes or changes in your policies in order to face what's happening.

S: The Maldives has been trying. It's level best to do what we can but what we are talking about is it has to be, you know, an international effort. It cannot be just a country alone that can, you know, resolve these issues because these are all, we are talking about, trans-boundary issues. It is international issues, it is what we are seeing, when I mentioned earlier, about water pollution in the Maldives. When I was a child, we only had to dig a hole in the ground, just about 3 to 4 feet, and you could get fresh water. And the wells are created, and we have been able to utilize this water -- but not anymore. The water table has turned saline, it has been brackish, it is no longer, you know, potable.

N: This is the effect of climate change?

S: It is climate change. Definitely. Because the global... climate change and the sea level rise have contributed to that. There has been, you know, pollutance mixed with the water table, and that's why the Maldives has, you know, a huge issue of, you know... on the one hand the Maldives was, you know, utilizing rainwater for years.

N: Yes.

S: And we have been very good at harvesting, you know, rainwater during the rainy season. But on the one hand, the climate change effect has contributed in the rain frequency. It is no longer the same as before.

N: The rain pattern has changed.

S: People cannot harvest rainwater. That is number one. Secondly, in the dry season they don't have a way of getting water. So in the recent past the capital has to provide water to a lot of islands. By boat. And that itself has contributed to huge costs. Who do you ask for it? I mean the country of course has to provide this water to the people out on the islands. And what is the solution in Male, the capital? It is also not a natural process. We have a huge plant for desalination from the sea water which is again so costly.

So the desalination plant is providing piped water to all house holds in Male, in the capital, which is a huge cost which cannot be provide to each and every island. Only very few islands have that investment. So, you know, during the dry season, we have been taking bucket loads of

water to the other islands. Even in the last dry season we have taken water to over 80 islands in the outline atolls. In the boats and that itself is a huge cost to the Government. To address these issues the Maldives government has been asking the United Nations system and the international community to assist these issues to be addressed in a much more meaningful manner. I mean this is exactly what we have been asking the whole SDG process, the whole post-2015 development agenda as well.

N: So as you mentioned the whole SDG process, we know that your country together with some other small islands states within the Association have been even asking the SDG process to include ocean as a stand-alone goal and to put more emphasis on the ocean and not have ocean just be a part of some of the goals like it was the case in MDGs.

What progress have you seen up till now and what are you planning to do, your country and other small developing islands states in that sense?

S: Well, when we talk about oceans we have been able to do quite a good groundwork during Rio+20, you know, conference. This was the first time we, the small island states, were able to, you know, bring that agenda into the UN process whereby the Rio+20 document were given an acknowledgement, not only in one paragraph but in many paragraphs on the importance of oceans...

N: So you made sure they was included..

S: Exactly. It was a starting point.

N: Yes.

S: So what I am saying is that this starting point we want to increase the momentum. I have this quote from the outcome document, paragraph 158 of Rio+20, which clearly talks about what we are talking about, you know, in the SDG process right now. It talks about that the only way, you know, oceans and seas have to be included in the sustainable development program and in the whole development agenda because that provides poverty eradication, it provides decent work, it provides full security. So these are three components which we are talking about in the SDG process. So if we can continue with this, this is the hope that we have. And you mentioned the Alliance of Small Island States, especially the SIDS, we have been... we have had this tri-preparatory process from the Pacific to the Caribbean, to the, you know, Indian ocean and the Mediterranean process. So when the intergovernmental process that was held in Barbados, we were able to again further to strengthen the process, to strengthen the need for oceans as a stand-alone goal to be included. And here, in the Barbados conference, we mentioned that if it is a source of livelihoods and an important element for identity for the people of SIDS, and, therefore, be concluded that oceans are a thematic priority and should be permanently reflected in the Sustainable Development Goals. And this was one of the quotes from the Barbados document. So our main target is... unless this ocean is included in the SDG process stand-alone

goal, actually it will be meaningless and during the general debate at the UN GA the Maldives also made a point that the SDG goals and the whole post-2015 agenda will be meaningless unless oceans can be kept as lively issue.

N: And then going back a little to what we started to talk about – how your country in a way is a representative what the whole world is facing in a sense that you are facing the threat of climate change and you kind of led to a process of mitigation and adaptation whether you want it or not. You are also a clear example of sustainable development challenges because, on one hand, you have to feed your nation, your people -- you are talking about the economy and economic growth and economic sustainability; on the other hand, these people depend on fishing and they depend on tourism. So how do you bring together fishing, tourism, economy, even in the context where we've learned that your country is planning to become the first marine reserve, first country marine reserve by 2017. And, as you mentioned yourself in conversations we had before, as you already have designated one atoll as a marine reserve and it's part of UNESCO, international heritage system. So how is this working for the Maldives because it's a challenge for the whole world?

S: Yes, actually, the fisheries and tourism, they are the two sectors that the Maldives' economy is dependent upon. And again it is based on the ocean based economy. Therefore, we have to see what sort of measures that the Maldives government can take and over the years we have been able to, you know, bring this issue to the fore of any developmental, you know, negotiations. And in the fisheries, we are one of the unique countries where we have been from time in memorium about fishermen, our fisherfolk has concentrated on purely sustainable means, you know, of fisheries by pole and line fishing which is... which I could very uncomfortably say perhaps the only country in the world which has, you know, practiced that. The fisher folk themselves have, banned net fishing, they have not allowed net fishing, therefore, our tuna which is caught is only dolphin friendly or, you know, in the most sustainable manner, which we have been, you know, concentrating on that. Then there are the fisheries. Tourism. Tourism is again... we started tourism, we introduced in 1972 in the Maldives. We are the fisheries... The tourist industries also premised on sustainable methods. The government has a very strict control on how a resort can be built. There has to be certain area, that can be only designated for having the structure built. The rest of the island has to be left as it is. And there has to be good methods of disposal of garbage. You can't just throw litter in the sea. So these have been regulated.

N: So there are government policies and regulations that are respected, endorsed...

S: Respected. Very strict. How the Maldives has been able to become a top tourist destination, one of the top tourist destinations, is through sustainable development methods. You know, that is something that the visitors, the travellers that come to the Maldives themselves, you know, appreciate.

N: Can I guess, it makes it a more attractive tourist destination because nowadays the customers, the tourists really have a deep appreciation for it.

S: Yes, yes. And we have introduced, shark fishing and shark finning completely banned in the country.

N: Yes.

S: Because that alone is such an attraction for the tourists, that is, on the one hand, secondly, on the conservation side, you know. If you go on, you know, taking, you know, the sharks, is not going to be healthy for the ocean.

N: Exactly.

S: So those are measures that our country alone has done which we, you know, would very recommend other countries to follow.

N: Thank you so much, Mr. Ambassador. I will thank you so much for the visit and for this wonderful conversation. And I am sure that the Maldives will continue to come up with great new sustainable practices and also present traditional sustainable practices that all the world can learn from. And we hope that as we as the organization, as Global Foundation for Democracy and Development, and other NGOs can support your cause which is the cause of the whole world for sustainable development.

S: Thank you very much.

N: Thank you so much for your visit.

S: Thank you.

N: Thank you for watching the Global Roundtable organized by Global Foundation for Democracy and Development. Today we spoke to Mr. Ambassador Ahmed Sareer, Permanent Mission of the Republic of Maldives to the United Nations.