

Statement by
H.E. Mr. John H. Licht, Ambassador Plenipotentiary and Extraordinary to
the Kingdom of Belgium and the European Union
Republic of Vanuatu
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to be checked against delivery

President Kwon, Honorable Ministers, Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour for me to stand in front of this assembly today on behalf of the Republic of Vanuatu.

Today, the Republic of Vanuatu would like to express its gratitude for the great work done by President Kwon of the Assembly of State Parties and President Eboe-Osuji of the International Criminal Court.

We are also particularly thankful for the work of Prosecutor Fatou Bensouda. We strongly support her words that the victims of atrocities look at the Court as a beacon of hope, and that the need to prevent further victimization must guide the discussions here at the Assembly. We feel that this is a clear direction that the court ought to move in, and we assure the Prosecutor of our full support. We also support the calls made for the Court to assume its responsibility in addressing issues such as people and drugs trafficking, transnational and cyber-crime.

Mr President,

It is important that we reflect on the fundamental reasons why the international community agreed in 1998 to adopt the Rome Statute. Various parts of the world were under turmoil and there was mass suffering from all sorts of shocking crimes. Some of these crimes went largely unnoticed for years due to a lack of fair and transparent media coverage, while others were reported by mainstream media and witnessed by a global audience that was deeply shocked but did not know how to respond.

Vanuatu is an island State in the Pacific that has continued to stand up strongly against impunity, atrocities and serious crimes of concern on the international front. We recognize

the importance of the international rule of law for our strategic relationships based on our national values, principles and beliefs as enshrined in our Constitution. We reach out to you today to speak of atrocities that affect not only my own people but also many of my fellow Pacific islanders. These atrocities include not only those that are ongoing without fair reporting for the past decades in places like West Papua – the former Netherlands New Guinea, which just yesterday suffered escalation of deadly violence, following the shooting and deaths of 31 construction workers in a central district of the region and the reported killing of an Indonesian investigator. Also the consequences of climate catastrophe: research by the Global Carbon Project which was launched at the UN climate summit in Katowice, Poland, says CO2 emissions will rise by 2.7% in 2018, an unprecedented and sharp upturn from the 1.6% rise in 2017.

Climate change related disasters are killing an ever-growing number of people in our region and worldwide. As a result of global warming our region witnesses cyclones of unprecedented intensity, exceeding our coping capacity. In 2015 Cyclone Pam reached category 5 intensity on March 12 as it approached Vanuatu, moving through our islands on March 13 with wind gusts of up to 280 kilometers per hour at its peak. This monster cyclone killed at least 15 people. Cyclone Pam also had a devastating impact on Vanuatu's infrastructure and economy. 17,000 homes were damaged affecting 166,000 people, 71% of the population. The total economic loss of 449.9 million dollars was equivalent to 64.1% of our country's GDP. The same can be seen in other parts of the Pacific ocean where we are exposed to increasingly devastating weather-related disasters

We already see parts of our traditional lands being swallowed by the sea, we see corals dying as a result of ocean acidification and warming, and we face increasingly harsh weather conditions that are unknown to us, and hostile to our traditional way of life. The root causes of climate change - resource exploitation at alarming rates and massive clearance of natural forests - also have spill-over effects on our water catchment sources and ecosystems. The resulting atrocities need to come under careful watch of the international community, especially where national environmental laws and basic human rights are blatantly ignored by multinational firms that have no concern for our environment or the dignity of our people. In sum, we need to open our eyes to what is happening, for example in our neighborhood where mass ongoing exploitation of natural resources is intertwined with a slow genocide of the people who have ancestral ties and DNA to these resources.

At the same time, we need to acknowledge a protection gap: there is an absence (vacuum) of international criminal laws relating to issues of unruly and dangerous environmental exploitation. I speak here today before travelling to Poland where I shall share with my colleagues my experiences here. We are acutely aware that COP24 cannot stop governments and corporations who are unwilling or unable to uphold their responsibility to protect the human rights of our people against climate catastrophe.

The International Criminal Court offers hope. Where political will fails, the rule of law can prevail. As the Honourable Minister Ralph Regenvanu, my Minister of Foreign Affairs, recently made clear at the Climate Vulnerable Forum summit, the climate loss and damages ravaging Vanuatu and many other parts of the world must not go unchallenged. Evidence tells us that 90 companies are responsible for the generation, extraction and production of fossil fuels that contribute over 2/3rd global greenhouse gas emissions. We also know there is a direct link between carbon emissions from fossil fuels and the suffering caused by climate impacts. We have, we are told, just 12 years. 12 years to transform our economies and societies.

My government is already exploring all avenues to utilise the judicial system including international law to protect our lives, our land our sea, to prevent climate catastrophe and secure reparations for victims. We believe the international community has a duty to ensure the very well-being of the natural world upon which we depend. The International Criminal Court has a role to play here.

Our challenge can unify many States. Because protecting this world, and the beauty of all beings upon it, is not something we do for ourselves, but because we carry the mantle of responsibility for the future of our children, our Earth and seas. Ours is indeed a collective quest: to bring the activities that cause and accelerate climate catastrophe and related atrocities to a halt. Our Pacific Island neighbours are key allies in this quest.

We recognize both the difficulty and importance of the involvement of the International Criminal Court within the Pacific Region. Mindful of our international commitment to international justice, we believe that it is important that the court extends its outreach to Pacific Island Nations. It is a well-known fact that we who suffer mostly from climate atrocities come from the smallest States in the world - and as you can see around you from the empty chairs, many of those States do not attend the ICC. As Pacific Island countries, we are also in need of adequate capacity and resources to curb exposure to illicit marine crime within our vast EEZ's.

To conclude, Mr. President, I invite all of you present here to join us in the struggle for justice in the face of the ongoing climate crisis and other novel threats to the peace. We urgently need to recognise all forms of genocide and start building the institutional framework and infrastructures to continue collaborate and bring them to justice. At the same time, we must consider ways to fill the normative gap related to climate and environmental crimes. Finally, Vanuatu would like to call upon other States to ratify the Rome Statute in order to strengthen our collective efforts to tackle the major challenges of the 21st century through the rule of international law. We applaud the engagement and

work of NGOs supporting the work of the ICC at all levels. We stand ready to work with you all.

Thank you Mr. President.