



Statement Delivered by HE Surangel S. Whipps Jr., President of Palau  
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Distinguished Delegates, Esteemed Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The year 1994 is marked by two historic and enduring events. Here in Jamaica, we witnessed the ratification of the United Nations' Convention on the Law of the Sea. In the same year, Palau finally regained its independence after four consecutive administrations of colonial rule. This dual milestone for both Palau and the ISA should remind us of the importance of true independence and stewardship over our natural resources.

Just as Palau worked hard to reclaim its land and ocean from others seeking to claim it as their own, we now strive to protect our shared ocean from a new form of colonialism. Our shared seabed is at risk of being destroyed and sold for profit, benefiting only a select few. As a sovereign nation, and like every other sovereign nation on Earth, we bear the crucial responsibility of safeguarding the common heritage of humankind. As members of this assembly, it is our duty to ensure that the ISA fulfills its mandate of "ensuring the effective protection of the marine environment."

Palau is a Big Ocean State - comprised of 99.92 percent ocean and less than .1 percent land. Our lives, our economy, and our health **are intrinsically linked** to this vast expanse of Pacific water. Our deep-rooted connection to the ocean has helped define us as a people, with our unique culture, and it has always driven us to champion its cause.

The ocean is the **lifeblood** of our planet. It generates the oxygen we breathe, sequesters and stores carbon, and provides livelihoods and food security for billions around the world. It has sustained humanity for millennia, yet we continue to place unprecedented demands on it. Because of these demands, our ocean is now in peril. And as a result, so are we.

Today, we are at a crossroads. The decisions we make at this Assembly will shape the future health and productivity of our oceans for generations to come.

Palau is the proud co-founder of the deep sea mining moratorium movement. A movement guided by our cultural tradition of BUL, and I am here to tell you why this stance is imperative.

Loosely translated as "moratorium," BUL embodies a holistic approach to ecosystem management. For millennia, our traditional leaders have used the BUL to protect vulnerable places and halt the extraction of finite resources, allowing such resources to regenerate. This traditional wisdom, rooted in our heritage, and complemented by science as used in today's world, has shaped Palau's laws and our network of protected areas.

Our ancestors understood the delicate balance of our environment. They knew that even a small change to one part of the ecosystem could trigger dramatic and cascading effects on all other parts. Informed by our traditional knowledge and the lack of scientific certainty about the impacts of deep seabed mining, Palau called for a moratorium on deep sea mining.

The Clarion-Clipperton Zone is a vast area - almost the size of the Continental United States - that lies in our shared backyard—the Pacific Ocean. What happens in this shared space affects us all, underscoring the urgent need for a precautionary approach.

In discussing the vital role of traditional knowledge in this process, I also want to recognize the significant contributions of Indigenous representatives from the Pacific at the ISA. They have been instrumental in continually highlighting the profound cultural connection that Pacific Islanders share with the deep ocean. Their tireless efforts ensure that this deep-seated significance is not overlooked or forgotten.

I would especially like to commend the work on Intangible Underwater Cultural Heritage led by the Federated States of Micronesia. FSM's leadership has brought to light the importance of preserving our intangible cultural heritage and ensuring that it is considered in these discussions.

I urge the Council and this Assembly to remember that the areas under consideration are not just physical spaces. They also hold immense cultural value. It is crucial that we engage in broad consultation and active participation with our traditional and Indigenous communities in this critical dialogue on deep seabed mining.

The deep-sea mining industry claims that extracting minerals from the ocean floor is essential for the green transition. **However**, numerous independent reports reveal that there are viable alternatives to meet this demand. Recycling existing materials, advancing sustainable terrestrial extraction, and embracing new technologies, all offer pathways that do not require the wholesale destruction of our ocean floor. We can obtain the necessary minerals from sources that are far less damaging to our planet. There is no need to sacrifice the health of our deep ocean ecosystems when sustainable and less harmful options are available.

**More alarmingly**, we face unknown consequences if we disturb the deep seabed's role in carbon sequestration and storage. In Palau, our scientists have discovered that destroying mangrove habitats not only disrupts their carbon storage ability but also releases stored carbon. Similar findings have emerged regarding deep-sea trawling. What happens when we disturb the fragile skin of our deep seabed? The answer is stark—we do not know. But so far, studies have shown that when the seabed is disturbed, life is extinguished and does not return.

Our call for a moratorium is rooted in this profound uncertainty: **let us not, in our haste to solve one problem, inadvertently and thoughtlessly create another**. We have been down that road before and hence, my country and many other small island developing states, now find ourselves on the frontline of climate change. A problem we didn't create, but that threatens our very existence.

Scientists cannot fully determine how plumes of toxic mining waste could affect migratory fish stocks. In the Pacific, we consume four times the global average of fish, and we supply 60% of the global tuna trade. The thought that one day the people of Palau might lose a vital economic and food source or hesitate to let their children eat fish is deeply troubling.

Two of my children are here today to remind me, and us, of what is at stake—we must be aware of the impact we could have on their and your children's future if we permit deep-sea mining to go ahead without fully understanding its repercussions. Their presence here also serves as a powerful reminder that the voices of youth need to be honored at the decision-making table to strengthen global ocean governance. After all, it is our duty to ensure that future generations inherit an ocean far healthier than the one we received. The actions we take now will shape the world our children will live in. We must act with foresight and responsibility, ensuring that our legacy is one of preservation and respect for our precious marine environment.

Back in the 70s, a proposal for a billion-dollar project emerged to construct a superport and fuel storage facility on top of Palau's fragile reefs in response to the energy crisis. This would have transformed Palau's economy - bringing unprecedented prosperity to its people but destroying its precious environment.

I was just 8 years old at the time. My father who was in his 30s was part of the Save Palau Movement led by a young High Chief Ibedul. They, alongside a group of young concerned citizens, rallied against the superport project, citing the numerous unknowns around the potential environmental, cultural and social impacts of this project. A fisherman and a dive tour operator, my father understood the importance of Palau's waters and had grave concerns about this initiative.

Their tireless efforts succeeded in halting this project. My father fought not only for his own children but for the future generations of Palau, and today, I stand alongside him, continuing the noble fight for all children and future generations of our planet.

I want to share an excerpt from the testimony of the late, High Chief Ibedul of Palau who protested against the proposal: 'The risks to our traditional, cultural, and social way of life are not worth the small economic benefit that we would gain from the proposed superport.'

Similarly, just like Chief Ibedul's testimony, the risks to our traditional, cultural, and social way of life are not worth the potential immediate economic gains should mining proceed without robust science-backed regulations.

As small Pacific Island nations, we find ourselves once again at the mercy of powerful external forces, reminiscent of the colonial exploitation that has scarred our history. Today, it is the deep-sea mining industry that seeks to exploit our resources, using our regions as testing grounds for unproven technologies and extracting wealth from our seabeds while leaving our communities to bear the environmental and social costs. This is colonialism by another name—economic imperialism—where multinational mining companies prioritize profits over the well-being of our people and ecosystems. The Clarion-Clipperton Zone has become a focal point for these activities, with big mining businesses leveraging the economic vulnerabilities of small Pacific Island states to gain access to our ocean floors. We must stand firm against this modern-day exploitation and assert our sovereignty and environmental stewardship, ensuring that our natural resources are managed sustainably and equitably for the benefit of all, not just the privileged few.

Let us also commit to finding better ways to improve the lives of those who seek economic gain through deep seabed mining. We need to explore sustainable alternatives that ensure Pacific nations can enhance the well-being of their people without compromising the health of our oceans.

In Palauan culture, inheritance is not measured in material possessions, but in the health of the land and ocean that you leave behind for the next generation. This ethos should guide all our decisions here at the ISA and beyond. Above all else, we must prioritize science, ethics, and our shared moral responsibility to future generations. After all, I believe, there is no liveable planet without a healthy ocean.

Let us remember the foundational principle enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS): **the deep seabed is the common heritage of humankind. It is a treasure to be held in trust for future generations, not a commodity to be exploited by any nation state or corporation.**

Our decisions today will reverberate through the ages, shaping the planet and ocean that our children, and their children, will inherit. We must act with wisdom and foresight, prioritizing the long-term health of our marine environments over short-term gains.

As our world transforms, and our international regulatory frameworks are developed to manage the change, let us also transform the International Seabed Authority into a body that truly embodies the spirit of UNCLOS, safeguarding our oceans as “the common heritage of humankind.”

Palau, together with Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, France, Germany, Ireland, Switzerland, and Vanuatu, have proposed a General Policy on Article 145: the obligation to protect and preserve the marine environment.

When UNCLOS was drafted over 30 years ago, our understanding of the deep ocean’s role in planetary stability was limited. Today, we know that 95% of Earth’s biosphere resides in the deep ocean and that the deep seabed is the largest living space on Earth – we urgently need its ecosystem services now, more than ever. Whether it is the undiscovered biodiversity that might unlock the cures for cancer, or the recent discovery just last week of “dark oxygen” being produced in the deep ocean, by the nodules on the seafloor, we have so much to learn about the deep seabed and the vital role it plays for our planet.

Palau calls upon you to join us in championing a moratorium on deep-sea mining. Let us forge an ISA that meets the demands of our present and our future. Only united can we fulfill the gravity of our mandate to protect and preserve the marine environment. Only united can we deliver on the promise of the common heritage of humankind to our future generations.

Think of the faces of your children and grandchildren. Think of the world they will live in. Will they inherit a vibrant, thriving ocean, or a barren, lifeless seabed? The choices we make today will determine their future. We have the power to leave a legacy of respect, and reverence for the ocean. In the spirit of unity and stewardship, we must rise to the challenge and protect the deep seabed for the future of our children, for the health of our planet, and for the enduring prosperity of all humankind.

My daughter, a college student who is here today, leaves us with this analogy: if you take a test without studying, you will fail. It's a practical reminder of the uncertainties we face around deep sea mining and the necessity of robust scientific study to ensure that the decisions we make today do not jeopardize their future and that of their children.

Let us not leave Jamaica having granted the mining industry a license to colonize the common heritage of humankind and destroy our greatest ally in our fight against climate change - our ocean.

Kom kmal mesulang. Thank you.