

**STATEMENT BY HON. SHIRLEY AYORKOR BOTCHWEY (MP) MINISTER  
FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND REGIONAL INTEGRATION OF THE  
REPUBLIC OF GHANA AT THE CLOSING PANEL OF THE OUR OCEAN  
CONFERENCE, MALTA, 5<sup>TH</sup> – 6<sup>TH</sup> OCTOBER, 2017**

**EXCELLENCIES,**

**DISTINGUISHED DELEGATES,**

**LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,**

I thank the European Union for the leadership role it has taken in placing our ocean on the front burner by organising this conference to further create inroads into our psyche on the need to save our ocean from further harm.

Our ocean, covering more than 70% of the earth's surface provides us with food and sustenance and therefore, it is inextricably linked to our health. We also rely on the ocean for our mineral resources, energy, livelihoods transportation and recreation. The wealth of resources that the ocean provides, forms an important part of the common heritage of mankind and we owe it to ourselves and to succeeding generations to conserve this natural heritage.

For this reason, Ghana's President, as UN Co-chair of the Eminent Group of Advocates for the Sustainable Development Goals, is committed to addressing the challenges of marine pollution and enhancing the management, protection, conservation and restoration of marine and coastal ecosystems. My country Ghana is blessed with a coastline spanning some 550 kilometres on the Gulf of Guinea, which is an important migration and calving habitat for whales and other marine species. Our coastline with its 90 lagoons and 6 Ramsar sites is threatened by high volumes of plastic and metal waste that choke breeding habitats for fish, birds and other wildlife.

SDG 14, an important part of the global goals cannot be tackled in isolation. It must involve the broader objectives of sustainable management of resources and environmentally sound economic development.

## **DISTINGUISHED DELEGATES,**

During the United Nations Oceans Conference held in New York in June 2017, the President of Ghana made two commitments towards the implementation of SDG 14, which are:

- (i) To eliminate pollution along the country's coast and significantly reduce pollution in the marine ecosystem by 2025, by tackling the current challenges posed by the use of plastics and indiscriminate disposal of waste; and,
- (ii) To complete the assessment of ecologically sensitive areas along the Ghanaian coast and the designation of Ghana's first marine protected area by 2025, to safeguard coastal and marine biodiversity.

All relevant stakeholders have therefore been urged to work collectively to ensure that Ghana's pledges are redeemed by the said timelines.

Consequently, I would like to call on all states that are yet to ratify the "London Convention on the Prevention of Marine Pollution" to do so and incorporate its provisions into their domestic legislation to ensure that we all achieve SDG 14 by 2030 as we do not intend to leave anyone behind.

## **LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,**

We are all aware that marine pollution is distributed throughout the ocean, from the Arctic to the Antarctic, across the Pacific and along the Atlantic basin. Floating debris represents a navigation hazard and has been implicated in many accidents, some of which have resulted in fatalities.

After two days of extensive deliberation, we have all become increasingly conscious of the dangers that plague our oceans and its ecosystem. As policy makers in our respective countries, we owe it to our generation and succeeding generations to right the wrong.

Ghana passed the Marine Pollution Act in 2016. The Act provides an updated framework to tackling marine pollution and gives stewardship that aligns us to other nations in protecting our oceans.

As an Oil producing country, we are mindful of the need to balance the development objectives that drive our oil revenue and the responsibility to safeguard the world's oceans.

I must admit that as a country, we are confronted with the issue of plastic pollution. The challenge we face with the growing urban population is linked to the quantum of

waste that is produced on a daily basis and the need to properly manage it. As a result, in 2009 Ghana's Ministry of Fisheries collaborated with the Ministry of Environment to launch the "Eco-Brigade", an ambitious project that seeks to clean and protect the country's beaches.

### **DISTINGUISHED LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,**

An instance worth recalling is what happened in Minamata, (Japan) in 1956, where people developed unprecedented and unexplained abnormalities. It was later discovered that this was due to the release of waste water high in methylmercury from industrial human activity. The high levels of mercury in both the water bodies and the fish resulted in over 10,000 people suffering various forms of brain damage due to mercury poisoning.

Why am I recalling the Minamata story? For many of us in Africa, artisanal gold mining is prevalent in our countries.

These miners ply their trade both inland and along the banks of rivers, and we are all cognisant of the fact that all streams and rivers flow into the sea. Fish in these rivers and the ocean feed on the mercury contaminated vegetation and convert the inorganic mercury into the deadly methylmercury. Fish protein binds more than 90% of this chemical so tightly, that, even the most vigorous cooking methods cannot remove it.

## **EXCELLENCIES,**

One may choose to sit in Accra or in any part of the world unconcerned. There is however a catch here. You do not know where the fish you are consuming is coming from, due to the high migrating tendencies of some fish species. Here lies the problem: methylmercury in fish readily crosses the placenta and damages the fetal brain. Such babies are often born with small heads and brains, which

subsequently develops into cerebral palsy, mental retardation and seizures.

## **DISTINGUISHED DELEGATES,**

While our knowledge of the impact of plastics in our oceans is not exhaustive, what we already know shows that we should not wait before taking action. It is only through joint efforts that we can have an impact and improve the state of our oceans for future generations. We need stronger international commitment to combat the plastic pollution of our oceans.

For us in Ghana, we believe that improving wastewater as well as solid waste collection and its management presents the most urgent short-term solution to reducing plastics. As marine pollution is of trans-boundary concern especially in developing countries, this requires

collaborative action; not simply from governments, but from industries and consumers alike.

In Ghana we work closely with our neighbouring countries through a number of coordinating centres established within the Gulf of Guinea to counter emerging threats like illegal mining and fishing, piracy as well as challenges relating to oil and gas exploration which ultimately have a detrimental effect on our ocean. Regional cooperation and action plans are, therefore, recommended to prevent further pollution at all levels. To this end, strengthened international cooperation and local action are both necessary. There is a great need to improve the sharing of knowledge, expertise and best practices, to encourage a more multi-disciplined approach, to develop public-private partnerships and empower Civil Society Organisations.

The end of this Conference should mark the turning point in the narrative on the conservation and sustainable use of our oceans for present and future generations. We must work hand in hand to reverse the cycle of decline and restore the health, productivity and resilience of our oceans and marine ecosystems.

Ghana supports the inclusion of all relevant stakeholders in finding solutions and to collectively tackle the critical problems related to our oceans. Increasing scientific knowledge and developing research capacity and transfer of marine technology will be critical. I am happy to note that this conference has revealed the tireless efforts of some civil society organisations who have presented their commitments here. May I take this opportunity to acknowledge John Kerry's incredible work being done in this regard.

I must conclude by emphasising that, establishing goals does not necessarily safeguard our environment. Goals must be accompanied by coherent strategies, policies and investments, with firm commitments, at the national and global level. Let us all, therefore, put our shoulders to the wheel and take up the challenge for the sake of our oceans, our planet and humanity. The time to act is now! We have no other option.

I thank you for your kind attention.