

Address by Ambassador Masao Nakayama
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to the United Nations

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The Challenges of Climate Change and Bioenergy
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(Check against delivery)

Mr Chairman, I first want to commend the Director General of FAO for his leadership on this critical issue of food security, and for launching the FAO Initiative on Soaring Food Prices and convening this Summit on World Food Security.

Mr Chairman, global initiatives and summits have an important role to play in mobilizing international commitments and resources, but we also want to be certain that real and timely improvements come out of these events.

In large events such as this, small islands often feel overwhelmed and even over-looked. However, I am very encouraged that the Director General has recognized that this food crisis has different manifestations in different regions and that solutions must be tailored to each situation. We must think globally and act locally if we expect effective results from this Initiative.

Now, perhaps I can best help in this process by describing how the current crisis affects my own country.

Mr Chairman, in the Federated States of Micronesia we pride ourselves on our beautiful natural environment. On most of our larger high islands visitors are greeted by the cascade of greenery, the splash of diverse traditional food crops and the relative plumpness and happiness of our younger people. However, that image is misleading for beneath the waving palm trees our people feel the harsh pinch of rising food prices and they have growing concerns about how they will eat in the future.

The fact is that the current crisis in food prices is truly global and it is striking us in our small islands. It affects us in ways perhaps less insidious than in other regions, and with a particular nuance that is unique to small isolated island nations, but nevertheless our people do face nutritional, lifestyle, and financial hardships in the current crisis of high food costs.

For Micronesia, the food security problem is not just about the current increase in basic food prices. It is also about the chronic, long-term crisis of structural food insecurity and about increasing unhealthiness of our people due largely to the flood of imports of more convenient, cheaper foods with low nutritional value.

This food security problem has been brewing over the past 120 years since the modern colonial era. In that time colonial values and economic interests, modern life-styles, promotion of trade in non-food cash crops, and the lower relative cost of imported food items, have led to significant social and production changes in our society.

First, we have seen a change in our dietary preferences. *Even though we are unable to commercially grow rice*, our Island people now regard rice as their staple. Our young people in particular have been raised on imported rice and have acquired a taste preference for rice over traditional foods. Mothers and institutional providers have fostered this by favoring rice because of its significant time-saving and ease over traditional food preparation.

On the production side, for many years imported food has been cheaper than domestically produced traditional and introduced food items, and without sufficient incentives to grow and market traditional food items our systems of traditional production and distribution have been weakened.

As a result, traditional systems and cultural values of sustainable food cultivation, storage, and preparation have been lost. To revive and extend these systems will require time and resources, access to improved planting materials, and education of consumers.

Mr Chairman, the Pacific Islands region has the additional burden of vast distances and isolation from global production centers and small markets that generate few economies of scale. The rising cost of fuel has exacerbated the rise in imported and local food prices, and family incomes now buckle under the twin pressures of higher food and higher energy costs. While we

do not yet face absolute shortages of food supply, the income that is being drained from the average home is causing ripples across the economy and curtails other necessities such as education, clothing, and shelter. For small fragile economies such as we have in the Pacific Islands, it does not take much shift in consumption and expenditures to create major economic and fiscal problems.

Regrettably, market solutions to the problem of food security are few:

- Direct substitution strategies are very limited. Our staple tree and root crops have fairly long gestation periods and relatively short harvest seasons.
- Our storage strategies are limited because most of these foods have very limited fresh shelf life and in the humid conditions food preservation is generally time consuming and of short durability. While local food crops are often very abundant in their season, most Pacific Island governments and communities simply do not have the technology, facilities, and financial reserves to preserve and store these crops easily.
- Our distribution strategies are limited by the cost and lack of internal transport to move local food crops from areas of abundance to areas of need.

If we expect to see changes in production we will have to address the financial needs of the farmers and rural communities. In that regard we are considering school and institutional feeding programs that can incorporate local food items to provide a short-term boost and encourage initial expansion of local production. Over the longer term, though, economically sustainable measures must prevail and in that regard we think that the sale of surplus traditional food crops to our people living abroad may be one way to make it worthwhile for farmers to convert to sustained traditional food production and preservation.

Mr Chairman, our short-term options may be limited but we are determined that our long-term prospects be improved. For that we propose that our future be informed and guided by our past. Our ancestors had to be self sustaining within isolated and fragile ecosystems. That was the only way that they could survive in the days before modern transportation. Their traditional agriculture methods were developed in ways that were environmentally sound, while food distribution and preparation practices were communally responsible. In the past 120 years we

moved away from those food systems and choices and now we are paying the price for that mindless change.

The Micronesian leadership is strongly committed to restore traditional food crops and production systems to their vitality and role in preserving the health and security of the community. While much has changed that simply cannot be reinstated, nevertheless we are confident that we can improve our relative food security to acceptable levels. We ask that outside nations and international institutions help us in that process.

Finally, Mr Chairman, I would like to draw our attention to the linkage between the food security crisis and global warming, in particular sea-level rise. One international food expert has figuratively likened the current escalating food prices to a tsunami, but for our small coral atolls the food security issue is part of the very literal drowning of some of our islands.

The rising sea-levels have caused taro gardens to be flooded and destroyed beyond rehabilitation, washed away or permanently inundated scarce land, and have stunted and undermined the coconut trees that have for generations anchored the island sands on top of the ocean and nourished and sheltered the atoll people. Elsewhere in the Pacific, some atoll islands are already being evacuated because they no longer produce sufficient food to support their inhabitants due to crop damage from seawater. Likewise in Micronesia, increasing sea-levels will make it more difficult to sustain and maintain our atoll people in their ancestral home islands.

Mr Chairman I hope that my brief remarks here today have illustrated that this current food price and security crisis is truly global although it has different manifestations and specific causes and consequences in different regions of the world. I hope that I have left you with a better appreciation of the nature of the crisis in the Pacific Islands, and in my country in particular.

Thank you.