



OUR ICE DEPENDENT WORLD

**Speech
by
the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
at the
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*The speech was delivered without notes.
This is a transcript of the recording.*

Premier of Greenland; Ambassadors; scientists; scholars;

Dear friends

It is indeed a great pleasure to welcome you all to Iceland, to the Open Assembly of the Northern Research Forum, although it is perhaps a little paradoxical to host the meeting in the hottest town in Iceland, Hveragerði, where people have made their living for almost half a century from utilizing the heat coming from the earth, to cultivate vegetables and thus lay the foundation of a healthier life for us here in Iceland.

Since we came together in Akureyri in the year 2000 for the first Open Assembly which was then concluded at the Presidential Residence, the Open Assembly has met in Russia, in Canada, in Alaska, in Sweden and in Finland and now we are back in Iceland.

In the meantime, the Arctic has moved from being almost peripheral in global concerns to now being centre stage. Not just because of increasing cooperation and research among the Arctic nations, but also because the global community is now acutely aware of how dependent the entire world is on its ice. Whether it is the ice in the Arctic Region and Greenland, whether it is the ice in Antarctica or whether it is the ice in what is now called the Third Pole, the Himalayan region.

It is a significant indication of this growing global concern and cooperation that we have with us here today, when we come back to Iceland with the Open Assembly of the Northern Research Forum, such a distinguished gathering of scientists and

experts from China, India, Nepal, Pakistan and other Himalayan regions, as well as a group of scientists from Europe and other parts of the world who have engaged in research on the Himalayas. This signifies that we now realize that our world is one. As far as relationship with ice is concerned, there are no longer national boundaries or broad continental distances. I want to take this opportunity here today to thank especially our friends from the Himalayan countries and those who have attended the Third Pole Environment Workshop here in Iceland for being willing to extend their stay to participate in this dialogue at the Open Assembly.

This gathering today is the first time in history that experts on the Arctic and the Himalayan region come together. This in itself is a significant landmark. But it also provides great hope that we now see ourselves as one community so far as these issues are concerned. We also realize that the future of our countries, as well as the future of the world, must depend on scientific research, examination and scholarly dialogue on what is happening to the ice regions of the world.

We could even say that with respect to the world as a whole, what has happened in the ten years that have passed since we first met in the Open Assembly of the Northern Research Forum is that the Arctic, together with Antarctica and the Himalayan region, has become the new intellectual frontier with respect to research, discoveries and active scholarly cooperation. This is a frontier which did not exist ten to fifteen years ago in the global intellectual community.

This new frontier, as I call it, must not only focus on research and scientific cooperation but also on new policy discussions between representatives of the countries that belong to the Arctic, and also of communities and countries in other parts of the world that are related to glacial regions.

We in the North cannot conduct a dialogue on our future without engaging people from other continents and other parts of the world. This meeting here today signifies in a strong way that we now recognize that what we thought ten years ago was an Inter-Arctic concern must now become a focus of wide-ranging global scientific and policy cooperation.

In this respect, cooperation between universities and research institutions in the Arctic and the creation of projects together with institutions of learning in other parts of the world including, as we have seen here, from the Himalayan countries, has reached a new and higher level of priority.

The reason is simple: Without extensive scientific knowledge and firm basis in research, the comprehensive policy formulation needed not just in the North but also in other ice covered regions of the world, is likely to have only very limited success.

Our progress, and the fate of people in the Arctic and also in the Himalayan regions, must therefore be firmly founded on scientific findings. In this respect the training of young scholars and scientists is of great importance. That is why the Northern Research Forum has always been concerned with inviting not just established scientists and leading scholars to our assemblies but also research students from the Arctic countries. It is a sign of the growing interest among the young academic

community that sixty distinguished young scholars applied to be with us here; the number indicates that there is an emerging and vibrant interest among the young community of scholars and scientists.

I also want to share with you how I have, in encounters with people and leaders in far-away places, learned how the experience of Arctic cooperation is now of great interest to others.

A fascinating example of this was a discussion I had a few years ago in Bangladesh with a government minister – a Minister for the Environment, who also happened to be a tribal king; his tribe numbered four hundred thousand people which might sound small in Bangladesh, but it sounds big in Iceland. He had familiarised himself in great detail with the rights and the political challenges facing the indigenous people of the Arctic. He had studied extensively the role which the indigenous organisations and their representatives have now established within the Arctic Council. He used this as an example to advocate not only in his country of Bangladesh, but in other regions of Asia, that the indigenous people should have a similar place at the table.

He also said to me: The greatest security threat that Bangladesh faces in the 21st century does not come from the armies of India and Pakistan. Then he pointed towards me and added: It comes from the melting of the ice in your part of the world, as well as the melting of the ice in the Himalayan regions and how that will affect the great rivers of the Indian Subcontinent.

This was a clear indication that leaders of indigenous peoples as well as government ministers in countries far away in Asia have now recognized that the greatest threat to the security of their people depends on what happens to the ice in the ice covered regions of the world.

Therefore I think it is highly appropriate, not just for us in the Arctic and the North, but for the entire world, that the theme of this Open Assembly should be: Our Ice Dependent World.

Indeed this is a welcome indication of how far we have moved in the political consciousness of climate change and the need for environmental concerns. We recognize that this is a relevant title. Ten years ago it wouldn't have made sense to host an assembly with this title.

We are also helped in this respect by a political innovation which was mentioned here briefly before, a political innovation which has taken place in the Arctic and the North and in many ways could become a model for other regions.

Let us not forget that twenty years ago the Arctic regions were among the most hostile and military dominated areas in the world. We have succeeded in constructing not only formal organisations and international councils, but also a network of informal cooperation. Now we have seen evidence of how different regions of Russia can cooperate directly with so-called nation states in the Arctic Regions. We have seen how Alaska can cooperate constructively with Iceland; that there are no longer any formal boundaries that define who can cooperate with whom in the Arctic and the North. In the last ten years we have established examples showing that everybody can cooperate with everybody else.

I want to welcome especially here today my friends from Alaska, especially Governor Hickel's son and his family. The late Wally Hickel, former Governor of Alaska and Secretary of Interior in the Nixon Administration, who died a few years ago, was one of the pioneers of cooperation in the North. Long before any of us who are here in this room saw the need for cross-national boundaries among the people in the Arctic and the North, this remarkable man of Alaska led visits to Russia and other parts trying to draw people together, even at the height of the Cold War.

He came to Iceland about ten years ago. I must admit I hadn't heard very much about him. He inspired me so much that it became one of the great privileges of my Presidency, not only to get to know him but also to learn from his vision and his remarkable book about the commons of the earth. It is a monumental thesis on how we must all come together in the interest of mankind.

As I have tried to describe in these opening remarks, our concerns have now moved from being solely on the Arctic and the North to becoming truly global. Not just because of the need for scientific cooperation but also because of the development of the Arctic, the development of the energy resources and how they can be utilized, the possibilities of opening up new sea routes through the North linking Asia and Europe and America in a new way. Also these global concerns are related to the ocean resources which the melting of the ice will open up in a new way, how we must cooperate, for example on the fisheries in the Arctic, the need to preserve the fish stocks, the creation of a new legal framework to do that in a responsible way; to formulate new laws and regulations which will be the topic of a conference which will start in Greenland later this week.

All of these issues – the future of energy utilisation in the Arctic, where about a quarter of the untapped energy reservoirs of the world are to be found, the opening up of new sea routes with all the opportunities, but also the challenges and the difficulties and the environmental threats that those sea routes will pose and also the utilisation in a responsible way of the ocean resources in the Arctic – all this creates a concrete need for active cooperation and scientific research.

So my dear friends, what we are discussing here today and tomorrow, what has brought us all together signifies a new level of international urgency because quite frankly we do not have much time. Recently, scientists have told us that climate change is happening three times faster in the Arctic than in other parts of the world.

We see from the dialogue in the Third Pole Environment Workshop how climate change is also impacting on Asia. I will never forget the dialogue I had in Yunnan in China last September when I learned from the local Mayor and representatives of the local council how four of their fifteen glaciers have already disappeared, how the changes in the water systems in this Chinese region were now causing them to vacate villages in the hills and bring people to different locations, how the famous water system in their ancient city was now being threatened.

The voices of the local representatives and their fear for the future because of what was happening to the glaciers in their part of China, was to me a striking evidence of how we must act quickly and unite in this urgent cooperation.

What we are doing here today and tomorrow with people from the Himalayas, and from all the regions in the Arctic and other countries in Europe, is to demonstrate to the world that we can indeed have a successful and productive dialogue on how urgent policies to prevent the disastrous effects of the disappearance of the ice must be based on scientific cooperation and sound knowledge.

I want to thank all of you who have travelled from afar to be with us here in Iceland. I want to thank the University of Akureyri and the secretariat for having brought us together. But let us make sure that the global dialogue that we will start here today will continue effectively and productively in the months and the years to come.