

UNESCAP 78th SESSION OF THE COMMISSION

Statement by

**Hon. Bob Loughman Weibur (MP), Prime Minister
Of the Republic of Vanuatu**

Chair of this Commission Session

Madame Executive Secretary of ESCAP – Ms. Armida Salsiah Alisjahbana,

Your Excellencies,

Distinguished Delegates

Ladies and Gentlemen

It gives me great pleasure today to deliver this statement on behalf of the Government and the people of the Republic of Vanuatu.

Over the past two years, development progress in the region has been threatened greatly by the COVID-19 pandemic. The world continues to face the grim implications of failing to keep the global temperature increase below 1.5 degrees and more so is the damage from natural disasters that recur with increasing frequency and intensity. More recently, a rapidly evolving crisis in Ukraine is expected to have wide-ranging socioeconomic impacts that disproportionately affect the vulnerable communities, including in our islands, through higher fuel and food prices.

We convene today in our collaborative effort to find solutions to these challenges, working together towards a better future for ourselves, our children and the future generations. In this context, I fully support the theme of this Commission Session “Reclaiming our future, a common agenda for advancing sustainable development in Asia and the Pacific”.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated vulnerabilities that already existed in Vanuatu due to climate change and natural disasters, and environmental degradation, and it exposed entire communities including women, people with disabilities, the elderly and our youth to

additional socioeconomic challenges. The pandemic has brought suffering and loss to every country in the region and affected all aspects of their societies and economies. Not even Vanuatu has escaped the impact of the pandemic and the vulnerable communities have been hit the hardest. Further to the devastating impact on human health and survival, the economic shutdowns have hurt those with the least to fall back on, making them even vulnerable and further widening the inequality gap.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

For Vanuatu, a recently graduated least developed country (LDC), the COVID challenge has been amplified by climate-fuelled natural disasters. The COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns were followed by Category 5 tropical Cyclone Harold in 2020, and then Cyclone Dovi in February 2022 compounded by landslides, volcanic ash falls in 2021, all of which threaten to roll back decades of development gains.

Climate Loss and Damage from more intense and frequent disasters is a defining feature for Vanuatu's economic performance, affecting key sectors such as agriculture, tourism and labor mobility. Disaster shocks affect agricultural production capacity, assets, and supply chains. Slow onset hazards like sea level rise and ocean acidification are occurring in the background with equally devastating impacts on our coastlines, coral reefs and tuna fisheries.

The agricultural sector has the potential to be the future driver of resilient economic growth. Reaping those opportunities requires increased access to production factors, information, and climate-resilient farming technologies. The labor mobility program has proven very beneficial despite the COVID-19 pandemic. The Government is currently adjusting the recruitment system to ensure a good alignment between labor demand and supply. I wish to extend Vanuatu's profound gratitude to Australia and New Zealand for their continuous support in this area.

The tourism sector has been deeply affected by COVID-19, climate change and natural disasters. On the bright side, the recent two year lockdown of the country has presented an opportunity for the government and private sector to take stock and identify pathways to re-orient Vanuatu's tourism industry to a more resilient model.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Since closure of international borders in March 2020, for us the COVID-19 went from a health threat to an economic emergency. Many businesses, especially those reliant on tourism effectively ground to a halt. No tourist arrivals and a reduced resident community immediately impacted the hospitality and construction sectors, putting at least 8,000 formal jobs in jeopardy and affecting the livelihoods of tens of thousands of people in the informal sector.

To build back better in response to COVID-19 and to address the impacts of climate change and geological disasters, the Vanuatu Government has put together unique and targeted policies and strategies, aligned to the National Sustainable Development Plan. We developed the Vanuatu Recovery Strategy that is aimed at supporting communities impacted by the disasters, providing that framework to recover, rebuild and emerge stronger and more resilient.

With assistance from our development partners, we introduced the COVID-19 stimulus package with a focus on preserving jobs, providing Government subsidies and commodity support grant, tuition fee exemption, grants for employment stabilization, stabilization business and trade activities, tax relief, facilitating rural growth and enabling remittances through labour mobility programs.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Over the past two years, the COVID-19 pandemic has coincided with a crisis that is likely to have even more serious ramifications over time – the changing climate. Vanuatu acknowledges and highly appreciates the climate finance provided by development partners, both bilaterally and through multilateral mechanisms such as the Green Climate Fund and the Global Environment Facility, however, the scale of finance provided to date does not sufficiently meet the needs of grassroots communities, nor does it address the loss and damage already being experienced in Vanuatu and around the world.

We hope that our partners will quickly meet the agreed 100 billion USD per year through 2025, and then expand the scale and scope of new, additional, predictable, easily accessible and transparent climate finance to avert, minimise and address climate impacts.

While Vanuatu continues to support the UN Climate Convention, faltering ambition requires us to use all other tools in our collective toolbox; including the tools of international law. At the upcoming 77th General Assembly of the United Nations, Vanuatu will propose a resolution calling on the International Court of Justice to give an Advisory Opinion on the obligations of States under international law to protect the rights of present and future generations against the adverse effects of climate change. We look forward to your invaluable support.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

On December 4, 2020, Vanuatu took a bold step to graduate out of the LDC category despite COVID-19 and TC Harold. We have done so because we believe it is the right thing to do which propels Vanuatu in a positive ‘can do’ attitude that we will rise up and do all we can with courage, boldness and determination to address and cope with the natural characteristics of our existence.

We wish to acknowledge the invaluable backing from UN Agencies such as UNESCAP, UNDESA, UNCTAD, the EU, the Government of Australia, New Zealand and other development partners who supported the development of our Smooth Transition Strategy. With their support, Vanuatu will transition smoothly beyond graduation – with new vigour, new thinking and new pathways of development and partnerships towards equality, resilience and environmental sustainability.

To our graduating LDC friends, it is important that preparation for a Smooth Transition Strategy is commenced earlier rather than later. This should give ample time for the graduating countries to not only address the direct short-term impacts of the loss of international support measures, but also cover medium to long term key development challenges such as economic diversification, technological upgrading, enhancing productive capacity, creation of decent and productive jobs, and most importantly building resilience to external shocks, natural disasters, climate change and future pandemics.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

To recover better together, we need to take comprehensive action at the global, regional and national level to address our common challenges. Effective and sustainable support

is now needed more than ever to regain regional momentum for advancing the 2030 Agenda, while building inclusive economies and resilient societies.

I thank you!