

Preparatory meeting for the Ocean Conference

**Statement of Mr. Miguel de Serpa Soares,
Under-Secretary-General for Legal Affairs and
United Nations Legal Counsel,
Special Advisor to the Presidents on oceans and legal matters
*Delivered by Mr. Stephen Mathias, Assistant Secretary-General for
Legal Affairs***

15 February 2017, 11:00 am

President of the General Assembly
Co-Facilitators,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to be with you today to deliver a statement on behalf of Mr. Miguel de Serpa Soares, Under-Secretary-General for Legal Affairs and United Nations Legal Counsel, and Special Advisor to the Presidents of the Conference on oceans and legal matters, who unfortunately could not be here today.

The Ocean Conference is a very important initiative which can serve to identify ways and means to support the implementation of Goal 14 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, entitled: Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development. This two-day preparatory meeting is critical to the success of the Ocean Conference. It aims to consider what will be the themes for the partnership dialogues to be held at the Ocean Conference and also provides an initial opportunity for delegations to discuss input into the "Call for action".

I am hopeful that the background note, prepared jointly by the Department of Economic and Social Affairs and the Office of Legal Affairs, on the basis of contributions received from entities throughout the Secretariat and the UN system, will usefully inform the discussions of the preparatory meeting, as well as subsequent preparatory work. It is important to note however, that the background note does not seek to be

comprehensive in its treatment of the various issues, and should therefore be read in conjunction with other important reports and publications of the United Nations system, including previous reports of the Secretary-General on oceans and the law of the sea and on sustainable fisheries.

These materials make clear that the oceans and seas are of profound economic, social, cultural and environmental significance to individual human beings and communities around the world. They are increasingly important contributors to the sustainable development of many States, both coastal and land-locked, as demonstrated by States' efforts to develop ocean-based economies. The oceans and their resources support human well-being and livelihoods, including through the invaluable ecosystems services they provide, particularly with respect to the regulation of the earth's climate.

However, the benefits we derive from the world's oceans are being threatened by human activities, both at sea and on land. Indeed, the oceans' vulnerability to anthropogenic stressors is increasingly clear.

The First Global Integrated Marine Assessment, completed in 2015, provides a stark picture of the current state of our oceans. Anthropogenic pressures on marine ecosystems, such as marine pollution, overexploitation of marine living resources, ocean acidification, coastal degradation and climate change are challenging the resilience of the oceans and their resources, as well as their continued ability to provide important ecosystems goods and services to humankind. The General Assembly has noted with concern the findings of the Assessment that the world's ocean is facing major pressures simultaneously with such great impacts that the limits of its carrying capacity are being, or, in some cases, have been reached.

These challenges facing the oceans are not new. Each year, they are at the very centre of the General Assembly's annual consideration of the item on oceans and the law of the sea and sustainable fisheries. They are also part of the discussions held in more specialized fora around the

world and are reflected in the commitments agreed upon within the context of the outcomes of major Conferences on sustainable development, such as Agenda 21, the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation, "The future we want", the SAMOA Pathway and the 2030 Agenda.

In particular, I would underline that the General Assembly and the international community have recognized the essential contribution of United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) to the sustainable development of the oceans and seas and reaffirmed that it sets out the legal framework within which all activities in the oceans and seas must be carried out and is of strategic importance as the basis for national, regional and global action and cooperation in the marine sector. This legal framework continues to be strengthened through the development of additional instruments at the global and regional levels.

Nevertheless, despite the considerable progress that has been made in the development of what is a very comprehensive legal and policy framework, with UNCLOS at its core, and various ocean management tools, the deterioration of the state of our oceans has continued, and some might say accelerated, mainly as a result of ineffective implementation. The General Assembly has noted with concern that delays in implementing solutions to the problems that have already been identified as threatening to degrade the world's oceans will lead, unnecessarily, to incurring greater environmental, social and economic costs.

If we are to maximize our benefits from the oceans over the long-term and achieve sustainable development, the time to move from words to action is now! And Goal 14 of the 2030 Agenda provides such opportunity with a roadmap for action through its ten targets.

The Secretary-General's background note highlights some of the opportunities and challenges for achieving each of the targets, and draws attention particularly to the need for capacity-building and enhanced financing as means of implementation.

I would like to highlight four central themes that arise from the background note in relation to the enhancement of the implementation of obligations and agreed commitments contained in international legal instruments:

- 1) There is a need to raise awareness of the obligations and commitments that already exist to further the sustainable development of the oceans.
- 2) There is a need to continue to strengthen implementation and cross-sectoral cooperation at the global, regional and national levels. It is well-recognized that the problems of ocean space are closely interrelated and need to be considered as a whole through an integrated, interdisciplinary and intersectoral approach.
- 3) Increased marine scientific research is required to learn more about the state of our oceans, and should be complemented by the dissemination and sharing of acquired scientific data.
- 4) Effective action to protect and preserve our oceans must be taken at all levels and include all relevant stakeholders. This will require substantially enhancing the financing of ocean initiatives and developing the capacity of developing States.

In this regard, the "Call for action" and partnership dialogues constitute vital components of the Ocean Conference, as they can serve to spur action to conserve and sustainably use the oceans and marine resources for sustainable development and future generations. Voluntary commitments and partnerships will be essential towards achieving of Goal 14. One example of such an oceans partnership, UN-Oceans, allows a large number of United Nations entities to actively cooperate and coordinate on ocean issues, including regarding the preparations for the Ocean Conference.

In conclusion, I wish to recall that the Goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda are integrated and indivisible. Thus, given the inter-relationship

between the various targets under Goal 14, results or lack thereof under one target will necessarily impact efforts to achieve other targets. Similarly, achieving Goal 14 will depend on progress under other Goals of the 2030 Agenda relating, for example, to food security and combatting climate change and its impacts.

On behalf of the United Nations Legal Counsel, I would like to wish you success in your deliberations during these two day in preparation for a productive and Ocean Conference.