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**Statement by the Vice Prime Minister for  
Foreign and European Affairs**

**H.E. Mr. Didier Reynders**

**6 June 2017, New York**

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, dear friends.  
Belgium aligns itself with the declaration of the European Union.

Allow me first of all to congratulate Fiji and Sweden for taking the initiative to organize the very first United Nations Ocean Conference. I also wish to congratulate the President of the General Assembly, Mr. Peter Thomson, for his remarkable stewardship. And a special thanks goes to the facilitators for their valuable work in reaching a final text. This week's debate on the conservation of life under water should galvanize efforts to implement global commitments under sustainable development goal 14.

The health of the oceans, seas and coastal areas is essential to our sustainable future. Oceans contribute to the eradication of poverty by providing livelihood opportunities and sustainable employment. They are essential for global food security and for human health. Achieving MDG14 will also advance the implementation of several other sustainable development goals.

Members of the United Nations are eager to be inspired by local or national commitments. Let's take advantage of this global conference to share experiences and best practices on how to conserve and sustainably use the ocean for the benefit of all. If we want to be successful we'll have to strengthen international cooperation within the framework of the United Nations and invest in various types of global and regional instruments.

To address the challenges of sustainable development, we need a multi-faceted approach that involves, in addition to governments, the private sector, civil society, think tanks and the academic world. Through our own national consultation process, I have realized how many Belgian captains of industry already offer services and solutions that put us on the road to a sustainable blue economy. They produce tailor-made solutions, be it wave energy, artificial reefs, wind, solar or hydroelectric power, dredging, land reclamation, desalination or recycling waste from the oceans.

Earlier this year I had the opportunity to visit Fiji and discuss the aspirations and concerns of low-lying coastal countries. We are listening to them. Many

small island developing States share similar challenges in terms of sustainable development.

Belgium's commitment to the objectives of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea is embodied in a marine management plan that we were the first to adopt. It designates one third of the Belgian part of the North Sea as a nature conservation area.

In the list of voluntary contributions of this conference, Belgium presented an action plan on marine litter to prevent macro and micro-waste from land and sea sources.

The Belgian government has also decided to acquire a new multidisciplinary research vessel. This state-of-the-art vessel will, acoustically speaking, be silent and equipped with state-of-the-art hydro-acoustic devices. It will have 500 square meters of space for laboratories and can accommodate 28 scientists and technicians. Its research area will extend from the North Pole to the Mediterranean Sea.

The Minister of Mobility and Transport has committed to develop an action plan to reduce the damage caused by ballast water from ships. To this end, Belgium strongly advocates partnerships with the private sector, specialized industries and research centers.

We also pay particular attention to the issue of abandoned or discarded fishing gear, lost every year in the ocean. Yesterday Belgium in collaboration with the Kingdom of Tonga organized a side event on this theme and made a contribution of 100.000 euros to the NGO World Animal Protection to launch a vast project of cleaning of fishing gear in the Pacific Ocean. Belgium has also signed the Declaration of Support for the Global Ghost Gear Initiative launched by the same NGO.

Belgium is particularly concerned about the impact of climate change and remains firmly committed to the achievement of the objectives agreed in the Paris Agreement. Belgium will contribute actively through financial support and expertise to the success of COP23 chaired by Fiji. In addition, Belgium pairs its political investment with financial support through instruments such as the Green Climate Fund, the Global Environment Facility and the Least Developed Countries Fund.

The Flemish Region in Belgium maintains a strong partnership with the UNESCO Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission and contributes through the UNESCO Trust Fund to the World Marine Heritage Program. This UNESCO Commission was also an excellent partner in organizing the Belgian Foreign Affairs Workshop on Biodiversity, Capacity Development and Technology Transfer, held in March in Belgium.

We encourage the creation of marine protected areas. In this sense we invited other bodies to join us in signing a declaration in support of marine reserves to ensure a meaningful implementation of SDD 14.5.

The management of maritime and marine territory is expected to accelerate. To date, only a fraction of the oceans is properly mapped and yet we really need a better understanding of the functioning of ocean ecosystems. Belgium therefore supports the suggestion that the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission of UNESCO draw up a proposal declaring 2021-2030 the United Nations International Decade for Ocean Sciences for Sustainable Development.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, dear friends of the oceans, without water there is no life. We have only one planet and it is covered with up to 70% by water. Without healthy oceans, our entire ecosystem will collapse. Let us seize this opportunity and let this 1st World Ocean Conference stimulate the political momentum to implement the ODD14 and protect life under water!

Thank you