
Life on the High(er) Seas: Adapting to Climate Change in the Maldives

AN INTERVIEW WITH ABDULLA SHAHID

Abdulla Shahid is Minister of Foreign Affairs for the Republic of Maldives. After first joining the Ministry in 1984, he earned his bachelor's degree in social science at Canberra College of Advanced Education, Australia, in 1987. He received his Master of Arts in 1991 from The Fletcher School. Upon graduation, he returned to the Ministry, where he rose quickly to the post of Director, in which capacity he headed the International Organizations and Conferences Department. In 1990, Mr. Shahid was appointed to the President's Advisory Council, serving until 1994. Subsequently he was appointed Executive Secretary to President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom in 1995, a post he held until 2005, when he became Minister of State for Foreign Affairs. In August 2007, Mr. Shahid was appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Mr. Shahid has represented the Maldives at the summits and meetings of numerous international organizations, including the United Nations, the Organization of the Islamic Conference, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, and the Non-Aligned Movement. In addition to his government posts, Mr. Shahid has also been a member of the Maldives' Peoples Majlis (Parliament) since 1994. In 2002 he was elected to his third consecutive terms as Representative of the Vaayu Atoll.

In March 2008, The Forum's staff editor Justin Ginnetti interviewed Mr. Shahid about the human dimension of climate change, short- and long-term response strategies taken by the Maldives Government, and the continued need for international collaboration regarding this global crisis.

FLETCHER FORUM: *As a result of the release of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC) Fourth Assessment Report (for which Fletcher Professor William Moomaw and former Fletcher Professor Adil Najam shared*

the Nobel Prize with Al Gore) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Bali Conference, the last year has resulted in a number of developments that have focused world attention on the threats posed by global climate change. Can you outline the evolution of the Republic of Maldives' assessment of the threat that climate change—especially rising sea levels—poses to your country?

FOREIGN MINISTER ABDULLA SHAHID: Climate change quite simply poses an existential threat to the Maldives. It calls into question our very survival as a functioning and viable state. If the IPCC's predictions on sea-level rise are correct, children born today in the Maldives face the possibility of not being able to live out their lives in their ancestral homeland. For this reason, the Maldives is extremely hearted by the recent upsurge in attention directed at the issue. Ultimately, public opinion influences politicians, and it is politicians who can make the decisions required to halt climate change.

The Maldives has been warning the world about climate change for over 20 years. In late 1987, President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom became the first world leader to use the words "climate change" when he spoke

..... to the UN General Assembly about the "Death of a Nation." Almost 20 years after that address, I spoke to the United Nations Security Council during its Thematic Debate on Energy, Security and Climate and expressed our disappointment with the slow action.

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The Maldives considers it vital to capitalize on the heightened world attention to climate change in order to make the most of the two-year window of opportunity provided by the Bali UNFCCC process. The combination of public opinion and political opportunity is, potentially, our very own "perfect storm." This time, however, it is a storm that we welcome.

FORUM: *The IPCC Fourth Assessment Report argues that the poorest countries and most vulnerable citizens will suffer the earliest and most damaging setbacks, even though they have contributed least to the problem. It also appeals to the “polluter pays” principle, which is fairly specific with regard to responsibility and liability for those who have caused climate change. First, many would consider this a provocative approach. Second, many developing countries claim they have the right to pollute as part of their development trajectory. How might this approach gain traction in the face of staunch opposition?*

SHAHID: It is true that the Alliance of Small Island States and poor countries have contributed least to the problem of global warming yet stand to suffer the most. The Maldives is a firm advocate of the principle of common but differentiated responsibility. All of us need to adapt our behavior if climate change is to be halted and reversed. That said, some countries, especially developed countries, clearly have a greater responsibility than others. They have a greater responsibility both to curb emissions to a deeper level and to help poorer and more vulnerable countries adapt to the reality of climate change.

FORUM: *The imperative to act based on present knowledge—that goes both ways, right? You mentioned that future generations of Maldivians face the likely prospect of not being able to live out their lives in their ancestral homeland. Where will they go? Is there an ethical imperative to plan now for this scenario, even if it is by no means a foregone conclusion?*

SHAHID: We do not believe that there is an ethical imperative to plan for the worst now. There is still a considerable amount of work that can be done to save countries like the Maldives. The moment we begin planning for the evacuation of our homeland is the moment we give up hope. We prefer to focus our resources into winning the fight, rather than in planning for possible defeat.

FORUM: *How did you decide to define your current approach, which is to focus on the human dimension of the problem and to appeal to the principle of universal human rights?*

SHAHID: Our starting point with the human dimension of climate change was to ask why the world has failed to act on climate change despite 20 years of warnings and appeals. Our conclusion was that many people continue to see the problem purely as a scientific one, measured in parts-per-million or degrees centigrade, rather than what it is: a human problem with human consequences. They also see it as a future prediction rather than as an immediate reality. In order to counter these misconceptions and, in so

doing, to increase the moral and ethical imperative to act, we thought it crucial to show the world the immediate and compelling human face of climate change. Thus the Human Dimension of Global Climate Change initiative was born.

When looking at how specific developments affect humans, understanding the impact on an individual's human rights is the obvious place to start. To our mind, and again to refer to the Human Development Report, the values that inspired the Universal Declaration of Human Rights were seen as a code of conduct for human affairs that would prevent "disregard and contempt for human rights that have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind." Allowing climate change to continue would be a political failure that merits the description "outrage to the conscience of mankind." It would represent a systematic violation of the

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We thus decided to convene a meeting of Small Island States in the Maldives in November 2007 to look at the human rights dimension of climate change. The meeting adopted the Male' Declaration, which lays down a roadmap for taking the issue forward.

Following the course set by that roadmap, we have now managed to secure a UN Resolution in the Human Rights Council (HRC) on "human rights and climate change." Our aim is to encourage a debate in the HRC on human rights implications of climate change and then to ensure that the findings are fed into the UNFCCC process. This will allow climate change negotiators to understand the real-world human implications of climate change and, in turn, it will fortify them to take the difficult decisions that are clearly necessary.

FORUM: *Now that the IPCC has begun to place more emphasis on climate change "adaptation" (as opposed to just "mitigation"), how has this shift in focus shaped your government's perception of the problem? In your eyes, does the shift simply represent a frank acknowledgment that it is too late to avoid some of the adverse effects of climate change? Or is the situation even more dire than that?*

SHAHID: It is too late to avoid some of the effects of climate change, simply because these effects are already happening. Beach erosion, loss of arable land, coral bleaching, increased natural disasters, forced migration—these consequences are already occurring all around the world.

With this in mind, common sense demands that we have adaptation strategies in place. In the Maldives, our strategy is centered on the Safer Island Strategy through which populations are gradually and voluntarily being moved to larger, safer islands with better natural protection, elevated key facilities, sea walls, and the like.

However, this does not mean we have given up. Unless the world wakes up, no sea wall on earth can save the Maldives. Adaptation is therefore not a substitute for mitigation.

FORUM: *It seems that there has been a barrage of new reports about the rate at which the ice sheets have been melting in both Greenland and Antarctica—and the news has not been good. On March 26th, The Guardian published another article stating that 160 square miles of the Wilkins ice shelf in Antarctica has broken off, leaving a much larger land-based ice sheet susceptible to collapse. Given that the loss of a relatively small fraction of the land-based ice will account for significant rises in sea levels, how worried are you that it is too late?*

SHAHID: We do not believe that it is too late. But clearly the clock is ticking. The news on climate change has been increasingly bad for the past 20 years, so the reports you mention are not particularly new. However, each new report demonstrates that time is running out.

FORUM: *Beyond the moral imperative to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and mitigate climate change, how, in your opinion, should the states responsible for climate change help countries like the Maldives to adapt?*

SHAHID: It is vital for developed countries to assist vulnerable states like the Maldives, through both financial assistance and technical know-how. The sea wall around Male' that saved us from the Asian Tsunami and the development of the safer islands—to give two examples—are hugely expensive. The narrow economic and human resource base in countries like the Maldives means that we have to rely on our international partners to make such schemes a reality.

FORUM: *Aside from building a sea wall around Male' and the construction of a new elevated island, what does "adaptation" mean for citizens of the Maldives? What is the country's long-term strategy, looking 50, or even 75, years down the road?*

SHAHID: As I mentioned, a core component of our policy response to climate change is population consolidation and regional development based on the Safer Island Strategy, whereby communities living on smaller, less populated, and potentially more vulnerable islands would be encouraged to resettle over time onto larger islands with better natural protection, enhanced coastal defenses, and more secure infrastructure.

The Safer Island Strategy is also closely linked to, and is coherent with, the Maldives' broader development strategy, especially the Population and Development Consolidation program through which the Maldives aims to move from a development strategy based on providing key infrastructure and services on each of the 200 or so inhabited islands (out of the approximately 1,200 islands) to a regional development approach based on voluntary migration and consolidation on larger safer islands where economies of scale will allow for the development of better infrastructure, the provision of better social services, and increased potential for economic growth.

Adaptation means living and coping with the challenges brought about by climate change. This is already a reality in the Maldives. The above-mentioned strategies are long-term. However, if the IPCC is correct, in 50 or 70 years there may be no Maldives to have a National Adaptation on Programmes of Action (NAPA).

FORUM: *Have Maldivians begun to talk about migration and resettlement as a last resort? If so, is there any consensus as to what such a migration would look like? Have you commenced resettlement pre-negotiations, as Tuvalu and Australia have done? Or have you initiated a process through the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) so that "climate change refugees" become part of that office's protection mandate, as has been the case with internally displaced persons (IDPs)?*

SHAHID: No, we have not considered such scenarios. The Maldives has great faith in man's ability to do good and to respond to great challenges with fortitude and perseverance. We cannot believe that mankind, which has the capacity, the knowledge, and the opportunity to act, will allow fellow human beings to lose their land, lives, and livelihoods to climate change.

FORUM: *Some might argue that you are placing too much faith in humanity. Is there a comparable historical precedent upon which you base this faith? Moreover, do you think the current international institutions are equipped to tackle this issue?*

SHAHID: Small countries like the Maldives need to have faith in humanity and in our international partners. We, by virtue of our size, cannot change the world unilaterally. We need to persuade, to cajole, to build consensus, and to build alliances. The UNFCCC is well-equipped to tackle climate change. What is needed is political will. As I mentioned, this is starting to emerge, but it is vital for countries like the Maldives not to become complacent but to keep pushing. A good historical precedent in which progress has been clear is with regard to CFCs and the ozone layer. There the international community took a clear decision to act, and the results are there for all to see.

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FORUM: *The November 2007 Male' Declaration on the Human Dimension of Global Climate Change requests the UNHRC "to convene, in March 2009, a debate on human rights and climate change." Can you discuss your objectives for a debate? For example, why a debate rather than a roundtable discussion? How do you envision the debate's structure (i.e., who would be debating whom?) and what issues you would like to debate? Would the potentially large number of interested parties be too unwieldy for an effective debate? And, yet, at the same time, if this session is billed as a debate, how will you entice parties like the United States or China to come to the table? Lastly, how did you settle on 2009 as the best time to hold this debate? If that long lead-time is necessary to convene a formal debate, are you proposing something less formal in the interim?*

SHAHID: The importance of the issue demands a full HRC debate, as has now been secured with our UN resolution. To hold only a small informal roundtable would be to suggest that millions of people around the world whose human rights are being undermined by climate change are not important enough to warrant a full HRC debate. That is not to say that we will not hold interim discussions. We will, as will other parties.

The debate will simply provide an opportunity for every state on earth, as well as NGOs and indigenous groups, to share and discuss how climate change is affecting human rights. By providing such a platform, we hope to raise awareness and to prod the world's conscience to act. The debate must be considered, informed, and balanced. For that reason, the resolution asks the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) to

conduct a study on the nexus between human rights and climate change. Such a study will take approximately one year to prepare. That is why the debate will be in 2009. In fact, 2009 is perfect because it will allow us to provide input into the crucial final year of the Bali negotiations.

FORUM: *Is the need for a new debate—outside the framework of the UNFCCC—a recognition that the UNFCCC has in some way failed? Is this a complementary process or the first step toward a new treaty regime?*

SHAHID: No, it is not recognition that UNFCCC has failed. The Maldives has spent the past 20 years preparing the ground for the UNFCCC and supporting its work. We believe that only a multilateral framework can deliver on climate change. For the same reason, we are determined that the process in the

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HRC will not replace, but rather complement, the UNFCCC Bali Process. There is a lot of language in the resolution that makes this point very clear.

Our aim is simple but important: to use the HRC study and debate to highlight the human impact of climate change as a way of empowering climate change negotiators in the UNFCCC process to take the decisions that they need to take.

That said, the study and the debate will be guided by the international community as a whole—not just by the Maldives. It is clear that many coun-

tries believe in environmental rights. Thus we will have to see what issues, ideas, or proposals come out of the debate.

FORUM: *Beyond other Small Island States, what kind of support have you been able to muster? The Netherlands may be very interested, but have you been surprised by support from unexpected places?*

SHAHID: The UN resolution was cosponsored by over 75 countries—including the Netherlands and many Small Island States. We believe that this makes it one of the most heavily supported resolutions in the (admittedly short) history of the HRC. Cosponsors came equally from all continents, from developed and developing nations, from small islands and landlocked countries. In other words, climate change affects us all, in all countries. All states have a stake in finding a solution.

I would not say we were surprised by support from unexpected places. But we were certainly pleasantly surprised by the amount of support we have received. We were also very grateful for the constructive approach taken by all countries—including those that we may have expected to be, let us say, skeptical.

FORUM: *You seem to regard the possible inevitability of external migration as a failure. In fact, much of the current discourse about migration as an adaptation strategy regards this as such. If one were to take the really long view, though, one notices that humans have frequently adapted to climactic changes by resettling, be it to follow migrating animals, more favorable growing seasons, etc. This is not to downplay the magnitude of the losses entailed by such migrations, but how do you measure the situation of the Maldivians against this longer historical context?*

SHAHID: It is true that over the course of history, people have migrated for a number of reasons, from the search for food to better economic prospects. Yet forced migration due to the complete loss of a territory is something altogether different. Moreover, while there are often good reasons to move from one country to another, the decision to make such a move is usually laced with sadness—leaving family and friends, leaving the place of childhood, etc. If those decisions are taken, it is preferable that they are taken for positive reasons, such as the search for better prospects, rather than for negative reasons, such as the loss of your country.

FORUM: *Regarding the thinking behind the Safer Island Strategy: how did the Ministry of Environment, Energy, and Water weigh the benefit of relocating people closer to resources and infrastructure against the risk of concentrating the population?*

SHAHID: The development of safer islands is one of the key priorities outlined in the National Adaptation Programme of Action initiated in 1998. Since that time, progress has been rather slow. First of all, it is important to note that relocation is voluntary—there can be no forced movement under any circumstances. Clearly, it took people a long time to understand the potential benefits of relocation and to weigh those benefits against the more obvious appeal of staying on their more familiar local islands.

Quite understandably, many islanders were for a long time reluctant to leave their home islands. Yet at the same time, the government needed to explain that it was difficult, if not impossible, to protect vulnerable communities on their existing small islands. These are difficult questions and this is why the government has always taken a slow, step-by-step approach.

FORUM: *Thank you for speaking with The Forum.* ■

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