COMMONWEALTH
SECRETARIAT

STATEMENT

by

H.E. Mr. Kamalesh Sharma
Commonwealth Secretary–General

at the

High Level Review Meeting on the Implementation of the Mauritius Strategy for Further Implementation of the Barbados Programme of Action for Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States

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MARLBOROUGH HOUSE PALL MALL LONDON SW1Y 5HX

TEL: Switchboard +44 (0)20 7747 6500 FAX: +44 (0)20 7930 0827
www.thecommonwealth.org

Mr. President,

Mr. Secretary-General,

Your Excellencies,

Distinguished colleagues…

On behalf of the Commonwealth, I sincerely thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak today.

Almost 'last 'is by no means 'least'… because 26 of the Commonwealth's 54 member countries are Small Island Developing States…

… and because the Commonwealth can claim to have pioneered the very science of the small state.

It has worked alongside its member states, and it has worked with partners like the World Bank.

With the Bank, it produced two groundbreaking reports in 2000 and 2005 on the inherent vulnerabilities – and

strengths – of small states, and particularly of remote islands.

From the Caribbean and the Mediterranean Seas, to the Atlantic, Indian and Pacific Oceans, this, then, is our constituency.

Further, it is our place of work.

From two countries central to our discourse, let two examples present the transformative power of Commonwealth assistance, worth some £60 million for Small Island Developing States in the last five years.

First, take our support for the recasting of national export strategies.... For instance in helping Mauritius diversify from being a mono-crop sugar economy, to being a seafood hub, upmarket garments exporter and a centre for financial services, distance education and tourism.

Second, take the Commonwealth support in trade and tourism – for instance in helping Barbados to upgrade its trade facilitation systems to international standards, and also to bring local producers, entrepreneurs and communities into its national tourism strategy. And here is a third: I could cite the 2 million additional square kilometers of seabed which we have helped 14 of our member countries claim right here, in the United Nations. Imagine the prospects and the livelihoods that these can yield.

So for over thirty years – starting long before 'Mauritius 2005' or 'Barbados 1994' – the Commonwealth has been a trusted and active partner in the cause of Small Island Developing States, both in speaking and acting on their behalf.

And yet, their vulnerability persists.

We knew this well before our current economic woes: growth in Commonwealth Small States has long since lagged behind.

In 2009, their real GDP contracted by 1.74 percent, compared with a 0.6 percent contraction in the world economy, and a 2.4 percent growth in developing ones. Investment and remittances went down – and inflation went up, in some countries doubling.

It is the Commonwealth's firm belief that the policies and programmes of the international financial institutions, and of the international community as a whole, need particularly to take the special vulnerabilities of the SIDS into account, in practical ways.

Here – very briefly – are four.

First, and we believe foremost, SIDS need a way forward on trade – on which they are so dependent, but in which they face such human, financial and institutional resource constraints.

As the trade debate continues, the impact of 'smallness' is not yet fully acknowledged. Some key 'small' agenda objectives include the need for consensus on development-oriented international trade rules, and ways to let small states bring their goods and services to larger markets.

Second, we need special debt relief packages for SIDS, which are among the most highly indebted countries in the world – some with public-debt-to-GDP ratios of over 100 per cent and so many unable to access concessional financing. They also need solutions to their challenges in accessing export finances and the money market.

Third, SIDS needs a stronger voice in the negotiation and implementation of international agreements.

They are willing to meet the standards set by the international community: but if they are to do so – and thereby to benefit – they need to be given a reasonable time frame in which to meet their new requirements.

They need to be part of the dialogue, not apart *from* it.

Fourth, SIDS needs access to climate change finance.

For some Commonwealth countries, rising water levels pose an imminent threat which is, quite literally, existential.

Many have taken pro-active and principled first steps towards decarbonising their own economies, despite being amongst the smallest emitters in the world.

And yet most climate finance to date has passed by.

The Commonwealth is already working towards practical solutions: the wider world must, too.

Colleagues, the Commonwealth commits to working closely with the international community and with development partners, to empower its – and the world's – small island developing states.

By recognizing both vulnerabilities and strengths, we can build resilience – and resilience will speed recovery and strengthen sustainability.

Thank you.