

Premier Tagelagi, Ministers, Heads of Delegation, ladies and Gentlemen

Kia Orana.

To the Secretary General, Dame Taylor and staff of the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, thank you for organizing this first meeting of the Parties to the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty, or the 'Rarotonga Treaty' as it is otherwise known.

We are meeting to reflect on the 35th Anniversary of the signing of the Treaty here in Rarotonga by the Forum Leaders and to take stock of how far we have come since that time with respect to upholding the key principles and commitments that were enshrined in this important Treaty.

It is true to say that, for our part, the Cook Islands has played an important role in the region's stand against nuclear weapons. This began formally with its hosting of the Forum in which the Treaty was finalized and signed, and which bears the name of our capital island, Rarotonga, some 35 years ago.

Sandwiched as we are between former testing sites to the east in French Polynesia, to the north in Christmas Island, and to the west in the Marshall Islands, we have always been acutely aware of and sensitive to the painful nuclear legacy of our Pacific Island brothers and sisters, the consequences of which are still being suffered to this day. To a lesser or greater extent we all share this awful legacy.

It is why the Cook Islands has taken such a strong stance towards keeping our Pacific Region nuclear free. From our hosting of the Rarotonga Treaty signing, to sailing our iconic Voyaging Vaka Te Au O Tonga to the test site in Muroroa, we have participated actively in the protest actions which ultimately helped to bring about the end of nuclear testing in the Pacific. More recently, our signing of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty in 2005, and becoming the second island country in the Pacific to join the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons in 2018, serve as further examples of the Cook Islands strong and resolute anti-nuclear stance.

We are cognizant, however, that we cannot afford to be complacent.

Noting the Forum Leaders' timely decision in 2019 to 'operationalise' the Treaty, we recognize and support the proposal from the Secretary General to convene a consultative committee to determine, amongst other things, whether the Treaty has scope to address the ongoing global challenges we continue to face from the

proliferation and modernization of nuclear arsenals. The Cook Islands look forward to the early establishment of the consultative committee to support progress key outcomes of our deliberations today.

From our perspective, the Rarotonga Treaty is but one part of the overall solution to achieve the total elimination of all weapons of mass destruction, and we would encourage other members to also get behind regional and global regimes that demand nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation of nuclear weapons.

In maintaining the integrity of the Treaty Zone, which forms a key part of the Blue Pacific Continent, we join the call on all other States from outside our region to take all appropriate measures to prevent any contamination of our region from nuclear material, as they are required to do under international law.

Colleagues, the Cook Islands stands ready to support and contribute to our collective effort in this regard, and we look forward to endorsing the outcomes of this important inaugural session.

Meitaki maata, e Kia Manuia.