

International Conference “Climate Change in the Middle East: Challenges and Solutions”

Nicosia, 4 May 2018

**Address by Mr Laurent Fabius,
Former President of COP 21**

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Your Excellencies,

Dear Minister Hamiouris,

President Papanicolas of the Cyprus Institute,

Distinguished colleagues and guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am pleased and honoured to be here with you for this conference. I want to thank you, Mister President, for your kind invitation to open the debates this morning, along with the Cyprus Minister of Education and Culture. The high-level and stimulating program of this two-day conference, the outstanding participants underline the dynamism of the Cyprus Institute, which has become a key research and education institution, especially on climate and environmental issues.

I have been asked to give my views, as former negotiator and President of COP 21, on this question: where do we stand today in terms of climate action? I will try to answer, then I will say a few words about an initiative that we have launched with many others specialists, endorsed by the French President Macron and that is right now being discussed by the UN: the “Global Pact for the Environment”.

1/ Let me first draw briefly a broad picture of climate action. I will speak bluntly: the situation is worrisome. The adoption of the Paris Agreement in December 2015 was in itself a very successful step and a turning point. 195 countries decided to adopt the first universal climate pact in history. We achieved a robust agreement, simultaneously universal, ambitious, fair and as legally binding as possible. As you know, it includes – and this result was far from settled in advance – the objective of holding the increase in the global average temperature to “*well below 2°C*” above pre-industrial levels and of “*pursuing efforts*” to limit the temperature increase to only 1.5°C. It includes as well the aim of carbon neutrality by the second half of the century. Furthermore, a mechanism for a five-yearly review of commitments is planned, with the obligation of always going upwards in the ambition.

This historical success was achieved thanks to an exceptional diplomatic endeavor but mostly due to a context that previous Conferences did not enjoy. This is what I call an “alignment of planets”. First, the “science planet”: the remarkable work of scientific IPCC experts has been decisive, by establishing unquestionably the reality of global warming, its human origins and its exacerbation. And precisely, we will begin this morning session of the conference by reviewing the “scientific basis” of climate action: where do we stand in terms of scientific research on climate change, especially in the Mediterranean and the Middle East? This is an occasion for me to congratulate all scientists for their crucial role in the diagnosis, the alert and the elaboration of concrete solutions concerning global warming. Second, the “social planet” contributed largely to the Paris success: awareness of the need for an agreement had risen prior to the Paris Conference, with a significant increase in commitment from economic and financial stakeholders, regions, cities, NGOs, religious and spiritual authorities, as well as citizens all around the world. Third, the “political planet” was also in a favourable position: beyond the strong commitment of the European Union, Chinese President Xi and former President Obama gave bold support, which was decisive as it was a requisite for success that the two largest

greenhouse gas emitters, should be on board. The Paris Agreement was ratified with an unprecedented rapidity.

However – and this is what I call the “post-Paris paradox” – despite the success of the Paris Agreement, the overall situation is critical and in some aspects worsening.

- The year 2017 was the warmest on record without an El Nino event and one of the 3 warmest years. The average global temperature has already been through a 1 degree Celsius increase in 2015, in comparison to pre-industrial levels. 1.5 degrees could be reached in the 2030s. 2 degrees could be passed by 2050, that is fifty years before the intended target. The CO₂ emissions have been on the rise again in 2017 after having stayed stable for a while. As the latest *Emissions Gap Report* issued by UNEP a few months ago pointed out, despite the efforts of the international community, “*current State pledges cover no more than a third of the emission reductions needed*” to limit the temperature rise at 2°C. Extreme weather episodes are bound to become more frequent and more intense leading to more expenses and costing human lives. In short, the deterioration is worse and faster than what was imagined. The figures regarding oceans,

forests, pollution, agriculture, food, and more generally, environment are critical. The red alert is on.

- Second, the current state of the world's "energy mix" is worrisome. Surely, renewable energies are developing fast – take for example the very positive initiative of the International Solar Alliance, or Bill Gates' \$1 billion fund, called Breakthrough Energy Ventures, to invest in new forms of clean energy. However, about 80% of the entire global energy mix still relies on the burning of fossil fuels. In terms of technology and financing, renewable energy resources are much more easily accessible and cheaper than before but they do remain unequally scattered throughout regions, and quantitatively insufficient. We will have a precise presentation on this crucial topic this afternoon.
- Third, the world has suffered a major setback when the American President announced his intention to withdraw from the Paris Agreement. Let me be clear: given the gravity of the situation, it is a dangerous non-sense. Not only does it exclude the second biggest polluter from the Paris Climate Agreement, but it also gives a very bad example to other countries that might have some doubts about whether to keep really engaged or not. In spite of the remarkable reaction, in

the US, of many cities, regions, universities, companies..., President Trump's decision might not destroy the worldwide movement towards climate action, but is a very serious blow.

- Fourth, there are some decisive question marks regarding the attitude of various countries. One of the key issues lies in the question of coal, more specifically charcoal in South Asia. If the decision taken by several South Asian countries to launch the construction of new coal-fired power-plants is maintained, the goal of a 2°C rise in temperature will become unachievable. In order to avoid a global catastrophe, alternative solutions have to be found rapidly. Regarding China, its fascinating “New Silk Road” has to be a “Green Silk Road”, otherwise its strong and positive national commitment to the action against climate change would stay incomplete. The same goes for oil-producing countries, who are now at a crossroad and need to choose between two paths. Either they keep their course of action and continue to fully exploit their fossil fuels, since it is the main source of their GDP. Or they decide to shift to renewable energies and face the still existing problem of intermittence and storage. For countries that depend so much on fossil fuels, none of these choices is easy. But their decision will be critical in the achievement of the global climate goals. And this observation

is particularly valid for this region where financial resources and perspectives come largely from fossil fuel energy wherever within the present state of science climate action requires that a large part of them in the future remain unexploited. The evolution of the “energy mix”, especially the level of investment in renewable energies, will be a crucial issue for the years to come. Last but not least, the progress made on the issue of carbon-pricing will be decisive. It is the purpose of the Carbon Pricing Leadership Coalition, a voluntary partnership of national and sub-national governments, businesses, and civil society organizations committed to expand the use of effective carbon pricing policies.

- An other major difficulty lies in the implementation of the Paris Agreement itself. The Agreement was a strong and new framework of principles and commitments, it now needs a “rulebook” for concrete implementation. The so-called “Paris rulebook” is now been discussed and should be formally approved at the COP 24 in Katowice, in Poland, next December. At present, discussions are difficult. In that perspective, important decisions have to been made on key issues like transparency, monitoring and financing. With the Paris Agreement, wealthy nations have reaffirmed their

commitment to show solidarity towards the more vulnerable, by spending in 2020 at least 100 billion dollars a year (public and private sector together) on climate concerns in poorer countries. This commitment has to be honoured, with increased efforts from the public sector, especially in order to finance adaptation and not only mitigation in developing countries. Mitigation and adaptation are the two crucial pillars of climate action and their specific aspects for the Mediterranean and the Middle East will be addressed tomorrow morning.

In short, the coming period of 2018-2020 represents a decisive three years. The environment in general and the climate in particular will face the moment of truth. Last November in Bonn COP 23 launched this period, along with the “One Planet Summit” last December in Paris. Next September, the IPCC report on the conditions for staying below the 1.5° threshold and the San Francisco Global Climate Action Summit organised by the Governor of California Jerry Brown will take place; then COP 24 in Poland, which will draw the conclusions of the so-called “Talanoa Dialogue” launched by the Fidji Islands currently running the COP 23 Presidency. In 2019 many events, and among them the UN Climate Summit organised by Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, and COP 25 will take place. In 2020 the upward

revision of national contributions, the effective availability of funding and technologies, the full implementation of the Paris Agreement, the Convention on Biological Diversity in China, and hopefully the adoption of the Global Pact – I will come back to this last point in a few minutes. These are some of the steps that will be taken in the next three years. Therefore, this is not a moment to lose, for we are in a race against time, and different disciplines and events are all interconnected.

Because, and this is a point I want to underline, climate change is not a sectorial problem, it is a cross-cutting issue. Climate disruption has some obvious consequences on biodiversity, as it implies a modification of the ecosystems, driving many species to extinction. But it also has direct and severe consequences on development, health, food, security, migrations, and ultimately on peace and security. All these issues are interrelated. The Mediterranean and Middle East region, that are at the core of our conference, with some differences between North and South, illustrate these interrelations. The session of this afternoon will precisely be dedicated to the impacts of climate change in the region – reciprocal impacts on health, agriculture, water and food, tourism, weather extremes, sustainable development, migrations, security and peace. Therefore, one can speak about a Middle East and North Africa Challenge. We all know, for example, that

droughts are jeopardizing the development of certain regions and causing mass population movements, that increasing frequency of dust storm episodes leads to a range of respiratory illnesses, or that climate change enhances the spread of vector-borne diseases like dengue fever – a subject that I know is of particular concern for the Cyprus Institute. All this shows that tackling climate change should not be a stand-alone policy but a systemic one. Since all issues are connected, we need both specific and global and cross-cutting solutions ranging from education to energy transition policy, from sharing of experience on concrete measures in order to upgrade nationally determined contributions to social economic approach and to governance. As for this question of policy challenges and policy options, we will have the opportunity to hear prominent voices tomorrow afternoon, among others Professor Jeffrey Sachs, former EU Commissioner Androulla Vassiliou, or EU Commissioner Christos Stylianides. Specialists will analyse the specificities (assets and challenges, pros and cons) of the Middle East and North Africa regions and examine solutions.

2/ Ladies and Gentlemen, I have used the word systemic, interrelated phenomenon. This leads me to my second and quicker

point: a global response is precisely the aim of the project I mentioned, the Global Pact for the Environment.

Given the interrelations between various elements included in the notion of “environment”, my belief is that we need also an international treaty gathering in a realistic approach the fundamental principles of environmental law. Until now, these principles have only been enshrined in declarations, with no legal value. For the last decades, experts of environmental law presented different projects of global environmental treaties. These projects, despite their quality, lacked the necessary political support and were unable to succeed. But in 2015, the adoption of the UN “Sustainable Development Goals” and the Paris Agreement created a momentum allowing further action.

In this context, shortly after I took office as President of the French Constitutional Council in 2016, I was invited to support the project of a Global Pact for the Environment. A first draft was elaborated by an international network of leading legal experts from forty different countries and among them representatives of this region, representing various legal cultures. The project was presented in Paris in June 2017, then endorsed by French President Emmanuel Macron and officially launched during the UN General

Assembly last September. Since then, the diplomatic phase has been underway.

What could be the content of this Global Pact for the Environment? Which will be compatible with the numerous (500) and useful existing sectorial international agreements? The draft proposed to establish some fundamental rights (right to live in a healthy environment, sovereignty over natural resources, common but differentiated responsibilities, a right to information and public participation on environmental matters, etc.) as well as duties with regard to nature (the duty to take care of the environment, the prevention principle, the polluter-pays principle etc.). The aim is to conciliate environmental preservation, social progress and sustainable development goals. Most of these principles are already widely known and consensual – arising from the 1992 Rio Declaration –, but the Pact could also enshrine some innovations. For example, the principle of “non-regression”, which means that every State can indeed decide new and specific rules but there can be no backsliding in the general level – and I insist on the word “general” – of environmental protection. The vital role of non-state actors in the field of environment is acknowledged too. The draft established by our group is meant as an inspiration for further diplomatic discussions and the precise content of the Pact will be discussed during the negotiations at the United Nations.

Regarding the negotiations, we very recently received good news because a week ago the United Nations General Assembly voted a first resolution establishing a working group to discuss the Global Pact project and asking the UN Secretary-General to deliver a report on the matter by the end of this year. This resolution has met a wide approval since a vast majority of States, 143 against 5 (and 7 abstentions), voted in favour. I want to thank all the countries who supported this initiative, and particularly Cyprus. The aim is now to open formal diplomatic negotiations next year, in order and to adopt the treaty preferably by the end of 2020.

This Pact will enable the consolidation and dissemination of the general principles of environmental law, encouraging the development of legislation and case law. It will be a tool available to all States as they implement the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development, which includes most of the principles of the Rio Declaration. Acknowledging the principles of common but differentiated responsibilities (CBDR), it will make it possible to create a space where the same environmental norms will be applied to all, making it easier for international companies to undertake necessary formalities and to ensure that they carry out their social and environmental responsibility: It will provide greater predictability and legal security. It will give new guarantees to

citizens with regard to States' actions for the protection of the environment and will strengthen citizens' capacity to assert their environmental rights before national courts.

The key point is now to ensure that the need for the Pact, supported by all European countries, is widely recognised and that States carry out the negotiations in a constructive manner. Given the gravity of the environmental situation, we cannot afford never-ending discussions.

Dear colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Paris Agreement was never intended as the end of the road. Its aim is to be the start of new intense and collective efforts to tackle climate change and the general deterioration of our environment. The Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East Region is part and parcel of this worldwide challenge but with specificities. Not only we cannot slow down but on the contrary we need to speed up the pace. It is why this Conference, the Cyprus Institute, and our common efforts are so important. The environmental threat is planetary, the response must be planetary too.