



Meeting of Senior Arctic Officials

9.4.2003

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REYKJAVÍK, 9 APRIL, 2003

Welcoming words of the Chair of the Arctic Council Foreign Minister Halldór Ásgrímsson

Ladies and gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you all to Iceland on the occasion of this first meeting of Senior Arctic Officials hosted under our chairmanship. I know you have a tight agenda in front of you. Therefore, I will resist the craving, common to all politicians at election time, to hold peoples's attention for too long.

In one way or another, I have been privileged to observe and to participate in the work of the Arctic Council from the beginning. With each new challenge, I have been encouraged to see this forum prosper and grow. In a world consumed by attention grabbing events, the Arctic Council has been working in quiet - with persistence and patience - to make a difference in the lives of people in the circumpolar region.

As is gradually being acknowledged, the Arctic environment has become an indicator of global environmental impacts such as climate change and long-range transboundary pollution. Accordingly, your work - in particular the pioneering efforts of the Working Groups - is acquiring greater relevance for the world community as a whole. For this reason, I believe we must continue to count on the Arctic Council, the international voice of the circumpolar region, to tell our story to the world and to build bridges to other international organizations. I am also convinced that we must now make a greater effort to reach out to our many observers and involve a greater number of them in our work.

Increasingly, we are also paying attention to human development in the Arctic region. The Arctic Human Development Report, a priority project under Iceland's lead, will focus attention on the living conditions of Arctic residents and serve as a knowledge base for our governments. During our chairmanship, we are particularly pleased to be able to highlight the role of information technology as a way of enhancing human security, prosperity and welfare in the North. In both of those areas, as in so many others, we need to derive maximum benefit from the active contribution of the indigenous peoples of the Arctic region.

As I look around this room, I see many friends of different backgrounds and ethnic origins. Diverse as we are, we have all come together to make common cause; to promote and to protect our own way of life, together with its exceptionally rich natural resources. To this end, the Arctic Council has gathered momentum over the past few years that we have a duty to maintain and to build on. I certainly hope that your discussions here in Reykjavík will come to be seen as a contribution to that endeavour.

Good luck with your meeting. And I now hand over to the Chair.
