



KIRIBATI

**Opening statement by Mrs Karibaiti Taoaba, Head of Delegation
and Secretary for the Ministry of Internal and Social Affairs**

Forty-third Session of the Committee on the Rights of the Child

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(Check against delivery)

Thank you, Madame Chair.

Madame Chair, distinguished Members of the Committee on the Rights of the Child, ladies and gentlemen.

We are honoured to be in Geneva representing the Kiribati Government to report to the Committee on our progress in implementing the Convention on the Rights of the Child. We bring you warm greetings from the people and the Government of Kiribati.

I would like to take this opportunity to introduce the members of my delegation: Dr Kabwea Tiban is the Director of Public Health with the Ministry of Health and Medical Services; Mr David Lambourne is the Solicitor-General with the Office of the Attorney-General; Ms Teretia Rikare is Senior Education Officer with the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports; and I am Mrs Karibaiti Taoaba, the Secretary of the Ministry of Internal and Social Affairs.

The rights of children are of particular importance to Kiribati. Aside from the special position of children and young people in our culture, we have a relatively young population. According to preliminary data from 2005 census, 49 per cent of the

population was aged under 20 years. In many ways our children are like the coconut trees upon which we rely so much for sustenance. We know that, unless we foster their growth and development, they will not bear the fruits that we need to sustain our future.

The Republic of Kiribati is one of the Small Island Developing States, and is also classified as a Least Developed Country. It consists of 33 small atolls, located in three major groupings astride the Equator in the Pacific Ocean - the Gilbert Group, the Line Group and the Phoenix Group. Our atolls lie scattered across more than 3.5 million square kilometres of ocean, which - to give you some perspective - is roughly the size of the total land area of all the countries of the European Union. However, with a total land area of only 810 square kilometres, we have more than 4000 square kilometres of ocean for every square kilometre of land. The capital, Tarawa, is more than 3000 kilometres away from our people in the northern Line Islands. As you can imagine, we face significant challenges in the delivery of services to over 92,000 people spread over such a huge portion of the planet.

The 2005 census puts the total population of Kiribati at 92,533 - up from 84,494 in 2000 - with an annual growth rate of 1.8%. However, the rate of growth is higher in the urban areas compared to the rural areas - caused mainly by internal migration. The population density in Te Inainano urban area on South Tarawa, which has a total land area of 14 square kilometres, is 1986 per square kilometre. Betio islet, also on South Tarawa, with a total land area of only 1.7 square kilometres, has a population density of over 7000 per square kilometre - greater than that of either Singapore or Hong Kong.

The concentration of population on South Tarawa has put considerable strain on the infrastructure and social services, leading to problems such as poor sanitation, inadequate water supply, congestion and a host of other issues. At the same time the geographical spread of the islands, the majority of which has very low population, means that the delivery of services to people living on all of our islands is difficult and expensive.

Kiribati has a strong traditional culture that revolves around relationships within and between groups, with well-defined traditional structures and systems. Such structures and systems also uphold many of the values and principles that are at the core of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The basic social and economic unit is the extended family, which provides social security to a child. This collective responsibility is extended to the village and the local community through which a child is taught his or her role and position in each of these groups.

In the Kiribati traditional culture, children do not have a voice in decision making and there are few opportunities for them to air their views. However, I consider that there is a growing acceptance for the need for the culture to evolve to give children a greater voice in the community.

However, we are seeing the erosion of the traditional culture in urban areas , and it is here that there is evidence of a growing number of children facing hardship, in part due to the absence of the support of the extended family and the village community.

Despite the challenges we face in the delivery of basic services such as primary health care, we are seeing signs of improvement in the general health of children. Considerable resources have been devoted to public health campaigns and programmes that focus on maternal and child health.

The achievements of Kiribati in the area of healthcare include a concerted program of immunisation against measles and rubella, with assistance from the United Nations Children's Fund, the World Health Organisation and other development partners. With the help of the European Union, the Government is also trying to improve medical services in the rural areas by providing better equipment and more qualified medical personnel. The Government is also working closely with traditional birth attendants to improve conditions for those who choose to give birth using traditional methods and practices.

As the traditional support system weakens in the urban areas, disparities are also increasing. There are disparities between socio-economic groups; urban and rural areas; between girls and boys; and in some instances between islands. Government is

implementing policies that will attempt to address these issues, including the reinvigoration of the Kiribati National Advisory Committee for Children, which comprises representatives from relevant Government Ministries, non-Government organisations, Churches and young people. The Committee's terms of reference include the co-ordination and oversight of the implementation of the Convention, and some advocacy activities.

Education indicators in Kiribati are generally sound when compared to other developing countries. Despite successes in achieving a high level of access to education, there are issues concerning the quality of education being provided that need to be addressed. There is also a growing need for improved informal and non-formal education, to cater for the growing number of young school leavers, to provide them with the necessary skills for employment in the private and public sectors.

The Government, through the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, has introduced new projects that are geared towards improving values, skills and knowledge of children so that they can contribute positively to development. There are also new initiatives from the Kiribati Police Service and the Social Welfare Division of my Ministry focussing on helping young people and children to actively participate in society.

Before closing, I wanted to make special mention of the assistance provided to us by UNICEF, for it is through their help that we have been able to be here with you today.

Madame Chair, distinguished members of the Committee, that has been a quick overview of the situation in Kiribati. I hope that I have been able to paint a picture in words that gives you all a better understanding of the constraints we face in implementing our obligations under the Convention. At the same time, I trust that you share our optimism for the future - that our young coconut trees may flourish.

Thank you.