



**Keynote Speech for the Special Envoy on Climate Change of Vanuatu
Opening Ceremony of the ICJ Oral Hearings
December 1st, 2024**

Distinguished Guests, Partners, and Friends,

It is an honour for me to stand here today on behalf of Vanuatu as we embark on this historic chapter in our shared pursuit of climate justice. The urgency of this cause cannot be overstated. The ICJ oral hearings starting tomorrow represent an unprecedented opportunity for the world to gain clear and authoritative guidance on what States are legally required to do to confront the climate crisis under international law.

This journey to The Hague has been extraordinary, not only for its historic significance, but also for the collaborative approach that has brought us here, together. Governments and youth have united to amplify a single, powerful call for justice. This collaboration underscores the essence of this historic movement: when we come together to merge our vision and efforts, transformative change is possible.

The involvement of youth and civil society organizations throughout this journey reflects our commitment to intergenerational equity.

Your energy and vision serve as a powerful reminder that this is not solely Vanuatu's story—it is the story of

every young person striving for a secure and sustainable future.

I want to personally thank you all for your resilience, strength, and dedication, which have been instrumental in making this movement a reality.

At the ICJ tomorrow, Vanuatu will argue that States already bear legal obligations under existing international law—obligations that go beyond the frameworks of the UNFCCC and the Paris Agreement. These obligations, rooted in long-standing legal principles, apply to States actions, and should be taken into account along with the actions of those that have done the most significant harm to our climate system.

We will not be asking the Court to create new laws, but to affirm that existing international laws, which govern State responsibility in nearly every other context, must also apply to the climate crisis.

For Vanuatu and other vulnerable States, this is deeply personal: rights such as self-determination and cultural preservation—foundational to our identity—are under imminent threat from rising seas and environmental degradation.

We remind ourselves that many peoples are still fighting for their political self determination - like the people of West Papua, whose struggle we

commemorate today, the 1st of December - and the people of New Caledonia and Tahiti in the Pacific.

But even those of us who have achieved political independence are still seeing our ability to determine our own futures undermined by the effects of climate change largely caused by those states that colonised us.

Our written submissions to the ICJ lay a robust foundation, and during these hearings, we will elaborate on key legal principles essential for achieving climate justice. Many of these principles were already affirmed in the recent advisory opinion by the International Tribunal of the Law of the Sea, highlighting their relevance and applicability to the climate crisis.

The ICJ provides a rare and vital platform where nations, regardless of size or power, stand as equals to address global injustices. For far too long, small island states like Vanuatu have been overshadowed in climate negotiations, unable to secure the decisive action necessary for survival. We saw this in Baku just a few weeks ago.

Through the ICJ, we seek not just a legal interpretation, but a framework for holding the historical polluters accountable for the harm caused to the climate system through their cumulative emissions that have caused the climate crisis we are in today.

A strong advisory opinion from the ICJ can direct how the world approaches climate responsibility. By clarifying States' obligations and the legal consequences of failures to fulfill these obligations, the Court can create a pathway for addressing critical but

often overlooked issues such as planned relocations to ease forced displacement due to climate impacts, the preservation of baselines and maritime borders and statehood itself due to sea-level rise, and – most importantly - the rights of future generations.

We hope the ICJ will uphold the obligations of States to protect the climate for present and future generations, identify the legal consequences of failing to meet these obligations, and set the mechanisms for accountability that must follow. Such clarity would lay the foundation for a fair and enforceable framework, addressing ongoing violations and providing justice for communities, particularly the world's most vulnerable that are already disproportionately bearing the brunt of climate harm, loss and damage.

Nine years ago, the Paris Agreement charted a course for addressing the climate crisis. Yet, nearly a decade later, nations like Vanuatu remain at the frontlines, grappling with irreparable harm while striving to prevent further devastation.

The commitments made at just a few weeks ago in Baku fall far short of what is required. We cannot afford incremental progress determined by profit margins while lives, cultures, and entire nations are at stake.

This campaign is more than just a legal endeavour; it is a moral and existential imperative. Together, we stand at a crossroads in history, united by a shared vision of climate justice.

To our partners—governments, civil society, and youth—your unwavering commitment has brought us to

this moment. Let us remember that when we join forces, we can overcome even the greatest challenges. The road ahead will be difficult, but with a favourable Advisory Opinion from the ICJ, and our continued collective determination, we can chart a path toward a more just and sustainable future for all.

Thank you. Tankyu tumas