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page 1 to 3

Speech

by Federal President Joachim Gauck

at a reception for ministers

within the framework of the VIth Petersberg Climate

Dialogue of the German Government

Schloss Bellevue

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We are at a crossroads.

This is a much used sentence, which is sometimes reduced to an empty phrase. And yet I have no qualms about using it today. For in 2015, it reflects better than any other the gravity of the issue you have gathered here in Berlin to address: what will the framework of international climate change mitigation look like from 2020 onwards? Or in broader terms: how can we live up to our responsibility towards future generations on this planet?

Many people on Earth are worried about the change in the world's climate. Some, especially those in the poorest countries, are at threat from flooding and droughts. We know of climate fluctuations in the course of our planet's history. Yet in the 21st century, there is mounting evidence that this time the main cause lies with human beings: we are the ones who have provoked this climate change and are currently accelerating it. We've read that in, for example, the IPCC's most recent report.

The report also says that the target the international community has set itself – namely limiting the rise in temperatures since the beginning of the industrial age to a maximum of two degrees celsius – is still realistic. But only swift and resolute action will enable us to reach this goal. And we must not ever forget that it is already almost one degree warmer today.

MEMBER OF STAFF RESPONSIBLE
ADDRESS
TEL / FAX
E-MAIL
WEBSITE

Ferdos Forudastan
Bundespräsidialamt
11010 Berlin
+49 30 2000-2021/-1926
presse@bpra.bund.de
www.bundespraesident.de

The international community wants to decide this year which steps humanity is prepared to take to prevent further global warming. Postponing bold decisions today would increase the problems which already exist. Or in the words of the English economist Nicholas Stern: "Delay is dangerous." The cost of not acting is rising, and not only in economic terms. That is why it is so important that the summit due to take place in Paris at the end of this year is a success. I am certain that this is the only way to reach viable agreements and sustainable solutions.

Climate negotiations take time. They have been going on for years, or even decades. Anyone who wants to participate must be patient. I am grateful to the German Government for establishing the Petersberg Climate Dialogue, a key forum for international exchange, as part of this long-term process. Unresolved issues are discussed unreservedly here.

We have seen encouraging signs this year: in contrast to the situation ahead of the Copenhagen summit, this time all parties have agreed on a joint text as a basis for the negotiations. Furthermore, more states than ever before are ready to support the steps to counter climate change. That is a good thing. For as climate change does not halt at national borders, we cannot afford to think exclusively in terms of national interests. Every government should take this to heart when it comes to setting its own climate change mitigation targets to reduce its country's emissions. Although these contributions are voluntary, they should be commensurate with what our countries are able to achieve. For we have to create and consolidate trust. In order to be able to take joint action, we need genuine commitment. Financial pledges – for example, to the Green Climate Fund – also demonstrate our will and our commitment.

I am glad that Germany made such pledges early on. For, as the holder of the current G7 Presidency, Germany has a special responsibility in this key year. Germany will work with its partners to find and promote ambitious global compromises in climate issues – so that the worldwide alliance against climate change we all hope for materialises.

I hope that there will be many more binding financial pledges and that this will lay the foundation for a broad consensus on the new climate change agreement.

We all had to learn a lesson in 2009, following the climate summit in Copenhagen: global structural change in response to the challenges of climate change cannot be initiated by international political negotiations alone. Rather, it also requires the efforts of civil society and business. It needs voluntary initiatives and also educational programmes which reach out to ordinary people in our countries and include them.

Through resolute action, we can lay the basis for further innovation and investment, which will help us advance towards a climate-friendly economy. In the spheres of science and research, many hurdles have already been cleared during the last few years to eliminate harmful greenhouse gases, and not only in the energy sector. Let us identify and seize the opportunities which this change towards a resource-neutral or at least resource-efficient economy presents.

In fair competition, we can create a global economic system which increasingly does without fossil fuels. That does not mean shifting industrial emissions to countries with lower environmental standards. In this respect, too, the future climate change agreement should herald a new phase on the road to a climate-neutral economic order. Also for the other economic instruments – for example, emissions trading – it remains true that they will only work if they have the support of an alliance of states working together in a spirit of partnership.

We know that the consequences of climate change hit poorer regions and countries especially hard. The international community has an obligation to provide assistance. Wealthier countries in particular should live up to their special responsibility – in their own interest.

Despite the differences between rich and poor countries, nothing reminds us more than the risks of climate change that we all need the same things to survive: air to breathe; water to drink. We all call this planet home.

One of the great German poets, Friedrich Schiller, expressed this idea more than two hundred years ago:

Under the same azure vault, over the same verdant earth,

Races, near and remote, in harmony wander together

Humanity faces a task unparalleled in its history. And yet we can resolve it if we understand that we belong together. We are not powerless, we are not without hope – and, above all, we should not be irresponsible!

It is up to us which path we choose at this crossroads. You, ladies and gentlemen, can make a special contribution this year. Many people have high expectations of you and your work.

I wish you every success.