

**Speech by the Permanent Representative of the Kyrgyz Republic to the United Nations Aida Kasymalieva**

**Utah Valley University**

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Dear participants of the 14th annual International Mountain Day observation at Utah Valley University. I would like to thank Dr. Lago and his Office for Global Engagement for inviting me to visit the State of Utah and to speak here at Utah Valley University (UVU) on this occasion. I welcome you all to today's presentation on the theme of: Five Years of Action for the Development of Mountain Regions. The State of Utah and UVU is the right place not only to talk about sustainable development for mountain livelihoods and communities but also extensive previous work and continued efforts to advance together this cause both in the State of Utah and globally, including in the Kyrgyz Republic. This is important for me to emphasize as a Permanent Representative of the mountainous Kyrgyz Republic at the United Nations, in my capacity as a chair of the Group of Friends of Mountainous Countries. The Group was created at the UN in 2019 and it is composed for now from 29 mountain states representing all continents.

I was born in the ancient city Uzgen, which is located in the heart of the mountains of the Kyrgyz Republic and was part of the Old Silk Road. When we came here to Utah on Sunday, we immediately felt at home, seeing the magnificent mountains of the Wasatch Front, which are part of the Rocky Mountains. My feelings became even stronger after the visit to the Museum of Natural History at the University of Utah.

I was glad to know that forty-five percent of Utah is covered by mountain ranges, with a mean elevation of 6,100 feet, the third highest in the U.S. These mountain ranges dominate over 90% of my native Kyrgyzstan, with almost 35 percent of its territory higher than 9,842 feet.

Both our regions have comparable territories, while the populations are 3,205,958 and 6,583,000, respectively.

Therefore, it is not a surprise that since 1999, the State of Utah and the Kyrgyz Republic have been able to build special ties with each other as mountain communities.

Since gaining its independence almost thirty years ago, Kyrgyzstan, has been advocating for the developmental needs and interests of mountain countries. These needs and interests have so far

been addressed in fifteen United Nations resolutions and at numerous high-level international events. Our country was among the main co-sponsors of the United Nations resolution in 1998 to observe 2002 as the International Year of Mountains (IYM).

In 2002, Kyrgyzstan hosted the First Global Mountain Summit that adopted an outcome document known as Bishkek Mountain Platform. The Summit decisions subsequently led to the proclamation of the eleventh of December as International Mountain Day and to the establishment of the Mountain Partnership Secretariat at the UN Food and Agriculture Organization to coordinate the sustainable mountain development globally.

Why are mountains so important for world communities?

As per the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, while thirteen percent of the world's population lives in the mountains, they provide resources for 915 million mountain-dwelling people - 90% of which are in developing countries and 1 in 3 of which is food insecurity.

Almost a third of the world's forests grow in mountainous regions, containing a diverse range of specialized trees that cannot survive in the lower reaches. Absorbing huge quantities of rainwater, they are also crucial to preventing erosion and landslides.

The Kyrgyz have a proverb “Тоолордо менин жүрөгүм, Тоолордо менин түнөгүм!”, which means “My heart is in the mountains, my refuge is in the mountains!” This emphasizes the sacred importance of mountains for our people. We can find their significance and greatness for all the peoples of the world where they exist in various epics and tales.

Mountains host 25% of the world's biodiversity on land and are home to highly specialized species that wouldn't survive elsewhere. Despite widespread urbanization, the mountains remain intact, providing refuge to unique species of flora and fauna such as the snow leopard, mountain gorilla, Marco Polo sheep, the mighty grizzly bear, and the majestic and free giants of the sky, the condors.

It is probably no coincidence that the unique nature, incredibly clean air, melted crystal clear waters and, at the same time, the harsh climate of the mountains forms a freedom-loving and strong personality in a person.

The brilliant writer, our compatriot Chingiz Aitmatov is the son of the Tien Shan mountains. A Nobel Prize winner in literature Gabriel Garcia Marquez was born in the Colombian Sierra Nevada mountains. The famous Indian film actor and director Raj Kapoor was born in the Hindu Kush mountains. The outstanding scientist Louis Pasteur was born in the French mountains Yura, and the great composer Mozart - in the Austrian Alps.

It has become axiomatic to say that mountains are the water towers of the world. Drops of water from their glaciers form raging rivers with clean and drinkable water, giving life to billions of inhabitants of our planet. This water is also vital in the production of hydropower.

Today, the magnificence of the mountains I described is confronted with a harsh reality. Climate change has placed mountain regions in a particularly vulnerable position. Mountain glaciers are rapidly melting, water resources are decreasing.

Kyrgyzstan intends to keep the interests and needs of all mountain countries high on a global agenda.

The last resolution was the declaration by the General Assembly last year 2023-2027 as a Five Years of Action for the Development of Mountain Regions in order to foster broader and inclusive international cooperation. This plan was initiated by Italy and the Kyrgyz Republic. It invites the international community, in particular, to enhance the international community's awareness of the problems faced by mountain countries and to give new impetus to international efforts to address these challenges. The final huge event at the end of this five years of action will be the Second Global Mountain Summit in Bishkek in 2027. I would like to invite you, as well, to take part in this Summit.

We value the contribution of the State of Utah and in particular Utah Valley University (UVU) in this endeavor. I would like to emphasize the leading role of the UVU History and Political Science Department in encouraging their students to work together with peers from the Kyrgyz Republic in joint advocacy of sustainable development for mountain regions. They are achieving successes thanks to a full support from the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, the Office for Global Engagement, in addition to the Utah Rotary District and Orem-Lindon Rotary Club.

UVU was the first academic institution in North America to join a Mountain Partnership in 2006. This happened because of its partnership established between the UVU and the International

University of Kyrgyzstan (IUK) in Bishkek. This academic partnership was expanded to strengthen bilateral cooperation between officials, members of legislative and judicial branches of power, and civil society representatives.

As a member of the Parliament of the Kyrgyz Republic during 2018-2021, I was pleased to know how members of the legislative branch of power from both sides have partnered during the last two decades. We appreciate the contribution of members of the Utah State Legislature to the development of the Parliamentary model of democracy in Kyrgyzstan.

I praise the contribution to legislative exchanges from my good friend, Congressman Joseph Pitts, who is participating in today's event via zoom. Many members of the Parliament of the Kyrgyz Republic have visited the U.S. by invitation of the Silk Road caucus at the U.S. Congress, which Congressman Pitts co-chaired with Senator Sam Brownback. In addition, since 1997, he has brought to the U.S. our parliamentarians, through the National Prayer Breakfast which takes place annually in February in Washington, D.C. He hosted my colleagues and me in February 2020. After that, it was a tradition for many of them to come to Utah. I am glad that today UVU provides us an opportunity to create a trilateral partnership with Congressman Pitts and his Center for Public Policy at Asbury University in Kentucky. This happens through an educational program to work together by focusing on sustainable mountain development. I am looking forward to working together with Asbury University to facilitate the partnership between this academic school located in the heart of the Appalachian Mountains with academic institutions in the Kyrgyz Republic under the umbrella of the "Five Years of Action for the Development of Mountain Regions."

My visit to the State of Utah also contributes to the established tradition for top envoys from the Kyrgyz Republic accredited both at the United States and the United Nations to regularly visit Salt Lake City and the City of Orem to get acquainted with both achievements and challenges in sustainable development in your mountain state.

I would like to highlight fruitful cooperation between UVU and academic institutions in Kyrgyzstan in developing joint educational programs with focus on the advocacy of sustainable mountain development in North America and globally.

As a woman with strong roots from the mountains of Alatau in Kyrgyzstan, I appreciate the initiative of UVU to advocate gender

equality as part of sustainable mountain development by hosting since 2007, the International Women of the Mountains Conferences (WOMC) under the umbrella of the Mountain Partnership. Academic institutions from the Kyrgyz Republic such as the IUK and Osh Technological University (OshTU) have made their own contribution to these efforts. These conferences covered so many important topics related to the status quo and challenges for mountain women empowerment through economic, political, social, technological means, and facilitation of their leadership roles, among others. The first WOMC was highlighted by the United Nations Secretary General's (UNSG) reports on SMD 2007 and 2009 for promoting gender agenda and building regional networks between Central Asia and Rocky Mountain states.

A new important step in the advocacy of the SMD was made by UVU with the development of the inclusive educational model based on student engaged learning which relied on involvement of students for SMD advocacy through student clubs. As a result, traditional and non-traditional students are encouraged to work as a group to solve problems faced by mountain communities with their teachers mentoring them through this process. Non-traditional students are usually older than 25 years of age and need to balance their education with family and job responsibilities. They created for that purpose Utah International Mountain Forum (UIMF), a coalition of student clubs at UVU.

As the first activity implemented by UVU students since 2010, students observe annually the UN International Mountain Days (IMDs) on December 11th. Today we will witness how UVU students will observe IMD for the 14th time, as they are the only academic institution in North America. You can see here also a copy of the backdrop poster from the IMD observation in 2012 as part of the International Conference Mountains and Climate which IUK hosted in Bishkek and OshTU in Osh City with attendance of the UVU delegation composed of 3 faculty and 2 students. UVU students participated in a youth conference which took place at that time as well. Our Permanent Mission to the UN was glad to have during IMD observation at the UN, UVU students as contributors in 2017, 2018.

IMD observations provided an important opportunity for students to gain knowledge and experiences to advocate for SMD in a professional way during several semesters. This happened when students hosted the fourth international WOMC in Orem, UT through SEL. It took more than 70 students 4 semesters to prepare the agenda, logistics, raise

funds, invite and accommodate more than 100 participants, including diplomats and governmental officials, scholars from North America and from around the world, including the Kyrgyz Republic. They also moderated sessions and adopted the final document of the conference. UNSG report on SMD 2016 featured UIMF as a host of the conference.

In 2015, the United Nations adopted 17 sustainable development goals as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, including target 6.6, target 15.1 and target 15.4. designated for the implementation of certain aspects of sustainable mountain development. The UVU delegation together with the officials from the Kyrgyz Republic advocated for the importance of sustainable mountain development during the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio De Janeiro in June 2012 (RIO+20). I praise the joint efforts of UVU students and their peers in the Kyrgyz Republic in advocating for the adoption of three targets during 2013-2015. President of the General Assembly, Ambassador Csaba Korosi told me how his Open Working Group worked with UVU faculty and students at that time. He was pleased to talk about those issues during his visit to UVU last May.

This week the 28<sup>th</sup> session of the Conference of the Parties (COP) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) takes place in the United Arab Emirates. I thank UVU students and their peers in Bishkek and Osh for laying ground for the mountain issues to be discussed by this important forum. In 2015, their joint team responded to the request of the Mountain Partnership to sign a petition asking to include mountain issues to the agenda of the UN Climate Change Conference (COP21) in Paris, France, on the 12<sup>th</sup> of December 2015. Students gathered more than 1,500 signatures from the 5,000 required by the UN secretariat.

Since 2016, UVU partnership with IUK and OshTU stimulated students both to implement service projects benefiting local communities and then report about achieved results during the sessions of the Commission on the Status of Women in New York.

Last March, when our Permanent Mission together with the Mountain Partnership co-hosted a side event advocating for mountain women, girls, and families during the 67th session of the Commission on the Status of Women, we were able to experience all benefits of the developed UVU student engaged learning model.

The event was moderated by Alitha Thompson, a non-traditional student and mother of 5 children. The panel included 17 presenters, including 5 diplomats, 2 United Nations representatives, 3 faculty members and 7 students from UVU, the Kyrgyz Republic, China, India, and South Sudan. Alitha was able to lead the efforts of the student group in preparing statements based on individual research, creating an agenda for the visit of the entire delegation to CSW67, securing visas and funds from multiple sources, and taking care of logistics. The event was truly student-driven and professionally implemented.

This was a valuable experience for the Group of Friends of Mountainous Countries. As I said earlier, the Kyrgyz Republic leads the group, comprising of 29 states representing both the developed and developing parts of the modern world. We are planning for next March to continue this important initiative by ensuring the presence in person of students from countries which are members of the Group during similar side events. Students from UVU, Bishkek and OshTU will work together to coordinate visits of their peers to the UN by jointly managing all aspects of their activities in New York. It is very important that Rotaractors are becoming a driving force for this initiative. It will stimulate the involvement of Rotary International in our activities by providing their resources, experiences, and skills. It will also be important for our mission to invite from the Kyrgyz Republic both traditional and non-traditional students like Alitha Thompson, to present again as an example to prove that students can be full-fledged contributors to the implementation of the sustainable development goals.

I hope to discuss many of those activities with faculty and students at UVU during our meetings today. In addition to the strengthening of ties between students using the SEL model, we would be interested in facilitating more programs of educational exchanges, including the Fulbright scholarships and joint research with focus on different aspects of sustainable mountain development both in the State of Utah and in the Kyrgyz Republic. We have an opportunity to contribute all our joint activities to the implementation of the Five Years of Action for the Development of Mountain Regions and present their results at the United Nations.

Thank you for your attention.