

ADDRESS BY THE MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS, VICE-ADMIRAL
OSCAR A. MONTES AT THE OPENING SESSION

It is sufficient to look at a map of the world to realize that the Argentine Republic is a country that is marked by its Antarctic destiny, towards which it is propelled by geographic and geopolitical reasons that cannot be gainsaid.

Its continental territory stretches decidedly towards the southern-most part of the American hemisphere, which is the nearest to the Antarctic, to which its islands extend without any break in continuity in the Antarctic peninsula, which has similar morphological features to those of the Andes mountain range.

Bearing in mind this geographic proximity, it is not strange that my country, since the dawn of its independence has been concerned with Antarctic activities and all that takes place on its icy mantle.

Argentina's presence there goes back to the early days of Criollo seal hunters, which, according to historic records, began in the second decade of the nineteenth century.

They set sail from the port of Buenos Aires and went to the Shetland islands in search of their prey.

The secrecy that shrouded their activities owing to reasons of trade caused the discovery of those islands to remain unknown for a long time and then to be attributed to other navigators.

Those that are recorded in the chronicles of the day were at times merely following in the wake of our seal hunters.

On the other hand, 74 years have already gone by since Argentina began its permanent occupation of the Antarctic, with the establishment of a base on the South Orkney islands on 22 February 1904.

For forty years Argentina was the only permanent occupant of Antarctica and its men, ever since those early days, have withstood the rigour of that desolate continent with courage and sacrifice, a fact that gives genuine proof of the interest with which my country has always looked upon those territories.

That is to say, Argentina's presence in Antarctica goes back well over seventy years, something of which we are extremely proud.

During that time, its activities in the area have been important and uninterrupted, both in ratifying its presence and consequent rights, and in its unceasing scientific work and combined efforts for the preservation of the Antarctic environment.

The year 1959 was a new and important milestone in the evolution of the historic process of Antarctica and, as was only natural, Argentina has likewise been intimately associated with the process that began that year.

The Washington conference ended with the adoption of the Antarctic Treaty, which marks the efforts of all the interested countries in preserving the area for peaceful purposes and, in particular, for carrying out scientific research.

A harmonious system of mutual cooperation was thus created, wherein the consultative parties have extended and exchanged their knowledge, and their men of science have participated reciprocally in numerous increasingly complex and advanced programmes.

The climate of concord and mutual support which has led to the considerable advances made has been a salient feature of the tasks developed during the nearly 20 years since the Antarctic Treaty entered into force.

But a new stage is now beginning, following the requirements of the present historic moment.

Indeed, the world of today faces acute needs which, in vast regions of the world, pose a grave problem of survival owing to the scarcity if not the exhaustion of natural resources.

This circumstance has befallen owing to an often irresponsible use of the riches of our planet.

Without falling into a neo-Malthusian attitude, already abandoned by those who created it, there is no doubt that the countries meeting here, whose responsibility in the preservation of one of the most important protein reserves in the world has been acknowledged by the international community, cannot remain indifferent to the situation.

But, although this spirit leads us to accept the fact that we must enter into a new phase that comprises the use of Antarctica's living resources, we are meeting here mainly to prevent this use from becoming an abuse.

The fundamental significance of our meeting is not to open a door to financial activities in Antarctica but, as stated in the text that is to be the centre of our debate, to take care that the activities that are about to commence shall not injure the delicate Antarctic ecosystem.

We are sure that all the consultative parties in the Antarctic Treaty share our concern and our views and that they are aware that the Antarctic and sub-Antarctic waters constitute a reserve of proteins for mankind and,

consequently, determine the need for an appropriate regime tending basically to their conservation.

Furthermore, the most outstanding features of that regime were already noted at the Ninth Consultative Meeting held in London last year.

At the Canberra session, which we are continuing here today, the first agreements on the subject were reached and, despite the different positions adopted by the delegations, it was most encouraging to reach a beginning of agreement on the text for the rules of procedure prepared by the Chairman of that meeting.

However, it is undeniable that the text submitted to the governments for consideration must now be very carefully examined in order to accomplish the delicate task of evolving a final draft that will take into account the viewpoints and interests of the participating countries and conciliate conflicting positions as fully as possible.

Consequently, we are afforded another opportunity to give one more proof of the spirit of cooperation that is one of the basic principles of the Antarctic Treaty, in open and responsible negotiations, designed to achieve solutions that are satisfactory to all the consultative parties.

In this respect, I can already give the assurance that my delegation will strive for that cooperation.

The future regime for the conservation of living resources will represent effective progress towards a major goal in this area, namely, the necessary preservation and protection not only of the Antarctic ecosystem but also of those that are dependent on it.

The factors of geographical proximity to which I have referred, make it even more imperative for us Argentines to advance in this area quickly and firmly, without forgetting our country's traditional position as regards the defence of its rights in the Antarctic.

Undoubtedly, in addition to scientific and technical aspects, the meeting will have to examine essential juridical and political questions.

It would be desirable that the regimen agreed upon should not alter the balance established by the Antarctic Treaty and maintained with so much effort for almost twenty years.

Argentina, one of the countries claiming sovereign rights, feels that the formula of conciliation of conflicting positions on which the system maintained since 1959 was based, should be embodied in the new convention in the form of provisions that contemplate the interests of all the consultative parties.

The regime to be established here cannot disregard that formula; in other words, it cannot ignore the political facts of Antarctica, including the permanent presence and action of some of the consultative parties there.

The instrument to be devised here represents a fundamental chapter in our mutual cooperation in terms of the consultative parties' responsibilities in Antarctica.

The adoption of appropriate measures for the conservation of living marine resources in Antarctica, before they suffer the depredation that has been the lot of other species in those waters, will effectively show the world that the countries here represented have been capable of fulfilling their responsibility with specific action.

And they are doing so without delays, following the road of understanding, progress and moderation in this most special moment regarding Antarctica -which somebody has already termed historical- and reiterating their firm decision to apply also in this area the principles and objectives embodied in the Antarctic Treaty.

The task begun in February of this year in the city of Canberra is I repeat, difficult and complex, but we approach it with confidence and hope that this two week meeting in Buenos Aires will serve to perfect the draft convention and produce the regime we all wish.

If we succeed, we shall give the international community a further proof of our ability to work in close collaboration to find sound and responsible solutions to the fundamental issues arising in connection with the complex problem of contemporary Antarctica.

If we fail to fulfil this responsibility, we shall be leaving a gap.

According to the rules of nature that are equally valid in juridical and political life, that gap, if not filled by us, will undoubtedly be filled by others, since a responsibility that is not met is in fact delegated.

Gentlemen, I cordially welcome each and all of you on behalf of the government and the people of Argentina.

I have the great honour of inaugurating the deliberations of this continuation of the Second Special Consultative Meeting of the Antarctic Treaty and express my best wishes for success in the task for which you have today gathered in the city of Buenos Aires.