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Ny-Ålesund Symposium 2014: Breaking the Climate Stalemate

Opening Statement

Ladies and gentlemen!

Welcome to Svalbard. And welcome to Ny-Ålesund!

“Nor-way” actually means “the way to the North” in the old Norwegian language. And this really is the High North.

Next stop is the North Pole.

Norwegians claim that Ny-Ålesund is the permanent settlement closest to the North Pole. Some Canadians and Greenlanders make the same claim about other places.

But I dare say: Try to find a café, a post office or an airport anywhere else at 79 degrees north.

Let me try to illustrate how far north you are:

I am from Lillesand in the south of Norway. If I travel the same distance from there, but go **south** instead of **north**, I would end up in Tunis in North Africa.

From here to the North Pole is only half the distance as from here to Oslo.

No wonder many North Pole expeditions have started from Ny-Ålesund. (Most of them were not successful, but that is another story).

The size of Bangladesh, Svalbard has about 2.500 inhabitants.

“Svalbard found” is a statement in Viking Sagas from 1194. It is believed Norwegians travelled here from that time to hunt and fish.

In 1596 William Barents rediscovered Svalbard – or Spitsbergen as he called it - on his search for the Northeast Passage.

It then became the scene for the first race for oil in the Arctic. Whale oil.

Later, coal mining became the main source of income.

In Ny Ålesund, the Kings Bay company operated the mine.

Kings Bay plays a crucial role in Norwegian political history. A coal mine accident here in 1962 with 21 miners killed, led to the resignation of the Labour party government.

A non socialist coalition took over, after nonstop Labour party rule since 1945. The coal mine was closed.

Work in the Polar Regions was mostly a male activity. In Antarctica, many countries denied long-time stay of women at their bases.

Women were not denied in Svalbard. But the settlements were dominated by men.

The Norwegian researcher Monica Christensen wrote in her diary about rooms decorated so tight with pinups that she couldn't even find room to put up a hanger. That was when she first came to Svalbard as a student in the seventies.

Today, things have changed. Research and tourism is more and more taking over the role of mining.

There are now more than 40 nationalities present in Svalbard

There is no better place to witness the large international presence than here in Ny-Ålesund:

Researchers from eleven different countries in addition to those from Norway are here at summer.

Outside, you can see two lions protecting the Chinese research station. Ny-Ålesund is a platform for international cooperation on polar research.

We have invited you here at 79 degrees North to try to find ways to push climate action forward.

Climate action **is** in a stalemate. There are many important plans and proposals. But we are not moving fast enough. The process needs help.

Each and one of you are here because we consider you to be an important player.

Private businesses often come up with innovations for a low-emission future.

They need a stable horizon and public support to enable a green growth shift.

Scientists can get the grave message out to the public by the media.

We need more cooperation and coordination.

We are at risk of pushing our climate system toward irreversible changes. The sooner we act, the lower the risk and cost.

This has been very well summed up in the latest report for the IPCC.

Nowhere do we see the impacts of climate change more evident than here in the Arctic. The region is warming two times faster than the global mean.

The Arctic summer sea ice has shrunk by 14 per cent per decade since 1979. Ice-free summers in the Arctic Ocean are “very likely” by mid-Century.

We can see the effects right out the window. This fjord, “Kongsfjorden”, or “Kings Bay”, used to be an Arctic fjord covered by ice till early summer. Here, polar bears were trying to catch seal at their breathing holes.

Not anymore. Today Kongsfjorden, like most fjords at the western coast of Svalbard, is almost completely open year round. There are poor conditions for ice-seals and polar bears.

Hardly any ringed-seal pups survive their first years in these waters anymore.

I actually hesitate to talk about the polar bear in international meetings. The effects of climate change are worse in other parts of the world. Extreme weather threatens the livelihood and food security in many countries.

But the melting of the Arctic is not only a problem for polar bears – it is a global concern.

The white Arctic sea ice is a quite good sun reflector. The dark sea surface is less reflective. So when the ice disappears and the open waters absorb the sun's heat, global warming is amplified.

As a result of this, the melting of the Greenland ice sheet is also accelerating. That might lead to sea level rise with global consequences.

Melting of the Arctic sea ice also opens up economic opportunities.

Examples are new shipping routes and new areas for commercial fishing. There is also discussion about oil and gas exploration up to the ice cap.

But the risks and consequences of ice melting count more than these opportunities.

I strongly believe in having a generation perspective. Not only a perspective that lasts to the next election.

Norway will be a front-runner in the battle against climate change. **Domestically**, through policy incentives that drive innovation for a low-emission economy. And **internationally**, as a global leader for a strong international agreement in 2015:

- With mitigation numbers in Paris
- With a support architecture that delivers results
- A transformative agreement – building on green growth and climate resilience

Norway will remain a front-runner in international efforts to combat deforestation. Sustainable land use can deliver at least 20 percent and as much as 60 percent of the emission cuts needed by 2030 to stay below the two degree target.

In addition, we will continue to create renewable energy in developing countries. We will combat short lived climate pollutants such as black carbon, a particular threat here in the Arctic.

And Norway will continue to work for a right price on carbon. The other side of that coin is subsidies on fossil fuels. Polluters should pay, not receive subsidies.

Last October, I became a cabinet minister. Since then, my agenda has been extremely busy.

It is therefore a privilege to focus on **one** issue for **two** whole days.

Even better, with leading experts from research, government, private sector and media.

Better still, in a place where my cell phone will not work!

My hope is that taking off your shoes and shaking you all together here in Ny-Ålesund will create a good environment for common thinking.

Across disciplines. To discuss what are the best ideas. And how we can put them into practice.

Former American president Mr. Abraham Lincoln once said; “If we fail to prepare – we prepare to fail”. Failing to meet the climate challenge is not an option – so let us start preparing!

Thank you!