

Maldives foreign minister elected UN General Assembly president

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Maldives' Foreign Minister Abdulla Shahid [File: Alasdair Pal/Reuters]

United Nations, June 8 (RHC)-- Foreign Minister Abdulla Shahid of the Maldives has won an election as the next president of the United Nations General Assembly. Shahid pledged to push for equal access to

coronavirus vaccines, a stronger and greener economic recovery and stepped-up efforts to tackle climate change.

He defeated a former Afghan Foreign Minister Zalmi Rassoul, in a 143-48 vote by secret ballot on Monday, with two of the assembly's 193 member nations abstaining. Diplomats from member nations, all wearing masks because of the pandemic, were called to the front of the assembly chamber one by one to deposit their ballot in a large wooden box.

Turkey's Volkan Bozkir, the current assembly president, said Shahid brings to the job "extensive experience in multilateral diplomacy," serving his Indian Ocean island nation twice as foreign minister and for 10 years before that as chief of staff to the president.

Shahid has been "a strong voice in calling attention to the impact on small island developing states" by the pandemic and by climate change, which threatens people's lives and livelihoods, Bozkir said.

Shahid, 59 years old, said he was "deeply humbled" by the trust shown by the UN members and the honour given to his island nation of 26 atolls, with a population of about 550,000, which lies in the Indian Ocean southwest of Sri Lanka and India.

Saying he has "an undying belief in multilateralism with an ardent desire to serve the international community," Shahid said his aim is to launch "a presidency of hope" and "to hit the ground running on day one in September as soon as I take my oath of office." "This is a crucial time for the United Nations and for the world," Shahid said. "There is very little time to spare."

He pointed to the past year's "disease, despair and devastation" as a result of the pandemic, along with increasing "inequality, injustice and instability" and the "suffering" of the planet from climate change.

Shahid said his priorities during his year-long presidency of the 76th session of the General Assembly are to recover from the pandemic, by making vaccines available to all people everywhere, and rebuilding economies stronger and greener and "and ensuring no country is left behind".

He said it can also be "a super session for nature" and to "seize momentum on responding to the needs of our planet," citing upcoming conferences and meetings on climate change, the oceans, biodiversity, sustainable transport and food systems as examples.

Leaders from the Maldives have warned that the country's existence is threatened by rising seas from climate change. Shahid said he will also focus on "respecting the rights of all," revitalising the United Nations, and engaging the media and civil society.

"I will raise my voice against gender discrimination, advocate for gender equality ... (and) not participate in any panels that are not gender-balanced," he said.

In recent months, the assembly has allowed in-person meetings with two representatives from each country allowed in the vast chamber, where social distancing is observed.

Shahid said in response to a question on future meetings that it would be prudent to maintain a cautious approach. "But as soon as possible, yes, it should be in our interest and the interest of this organisation to come back into the normalcy if at all possible."

The selection of the assembly president follows a regional rotation mandated by the world body and it was the turn of Asia to preside over the next year-long session.



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