



Address
by President of Iceland
Guðni Th. Jóhannesson
Easter Sunday
4 April 2021

Dear people of Iceland

I greet you on Easter Sunday, and express to you sincere good wishes from my wife and me. At this time last year I also delivered an address of this kind, in the shadow of the pandemic which was then just beginning. At that time I did not expect to be speaking again on this day, and for the same reason. Then, we had every reason to believe that the problem would soon be over. That did not happen. And now, yet again, social gatherings are subject to restrictions, and we must accept essential public-health measures. We must continue to display the tenacity that has served us so well. And let us hope, at least, that an address of this kind will not be delivered for the third time, a year from now. That might possibly place even greater strain on Icelandic resilience.

The virus, which has been raging for well over a year now, immediately highlighted how small and defenceless we are as human beings. Despite great and diverse advances, we did not have treatments or cures for a new kind of pandemic.

Yes, the pestilence has taught humanity humility, and here in Iceland we are constantly reminded of Nature's formidable power. Many of us still remember the harshness of the winter before this one, leading to power failures and other difficulties in the north and elsewhere. Avalanches fell in the West Fjords – fortunately with no loss of life. And shortly before last Christmas landslides in Seyðisfjörður devastated part of the town, and the beginning of this year saw a series of powerful earthquakes on the Reykjanes peninsula.

And then the eruption started. The new volcano in Geldingadalir (the Valley of the Geldings) is not expected to pose any danger to life or limb, thank goodness – unless people behave irresponsibly around the power of nature that has been unleashed there. It has been good to see how many people who know

how to be properly dressed and prepared for venturing into the wilderness – that is positive evidence of the Icelandic love of the outdoors. Some of the hikers, admittedly, have misjudged the conditions or overrated their own capacity and got into difficulties. And it is a shame to see that some of the sightseers have been leaving their rubbish behind in this magical place – this amphitheatre of creation. Let us all do our best to show appropriate respect for nature and other people, always and everywhere.

Here and now, I want to thank the search-and-rescue teams and police for all their vital work at and near the eruption site. Members of search-and-rescue teams from the local Suðurnes region have borne much of the burden, while teams from elsewhere in the country have also contributed. In record time, routes to the volcano were marked out, ropes were strung to help hikers climb safely, and parking spaces were made. All this deserves our thanks. But every person must take responsibility for him/herself, to take care, to help others rather than to hinder – and of course to call out for help if necessary.

Responsibility and solidarity. For months we have been battling the pestilence I mentioned earlier. Lives have been lost, and many people have been gravely ill. The situation in society has had an impact on the mental wellbeing of many. Anxiety increases, and also domestic violence – which should never happen. Unemployment and various setbacks affect the economy.

But let us not lose hope. We are fortunate in having many people working hard on our behalf. Here in Iceland it has long been regarded as good manners to thank people for work well done, and that is something I have tried to do – using various opportunities to thank people for their efforts and contributions. So once again I reiterate thanks to all those on whom we have relied during the pandemic.

Where would we be without all these people? And where would we be, had we not had the benefit of the knowledge and guidance of those who have been selected for leadership – our nationally-renowned “triumvirate” of the Director of Health, Chief Epidemiologist, State Police Civil Protection Chief, and others?

Naturally enough, opinions differ on this matter. The authorities, experts and others have made mistakes along the way – of course they have. But this is absolutely clear: national unity regarding public-health measures has served us well, as has our resilience. Discord and despondency would not have yielded the results we have achieved, with which we can be well pleased. If people around the world had the option of choosing a place to take shelter from the virus, Iceland would certainly be near the top of the list.

So let us continue on the path of solidarity. Let us not lose heart, but learn from experience. Let us always strive to do better. When the story of this

pandemic is written, no doubt the lesson learned will be that the most important factors are that people maintain their own personal anti-infection measures; that the public in general are prepared to comply with the scientists' arguments on necessary measures; that the government is largely guided by the experts' recommendations; that we are guided by our convictions, and not by command; that the public and private sectors are mutually supportive; that we work with other nations, but still rely on our own abilities; and that we ensure that no loopholes open in our border controls. We in Iceland know all this, from all that has gone well, as well as that which could have been done even better.

We also need to have hope. "Hope is a dangerous thing. Hope can drive a man insane," says the lifer Red in *The Shawshank Redemption*, the classic film based on a novel by Stephen King. "Hope is a dangerous thing for a woman like me to have," sings Lana Del Rey in one of her popular songs. But in both these creative works, the power of hope later emerges. And now the golden plover has arrived – the sweet harbinger of spring. "She has told me to wake and told me to toil," wrote poet Páll Ólafsson, "and welcome the summer with hope in my soul." (Translation Bernard Scudder).

We must still wait awhile to achieve full vaccination of the people of Iceland – and around the world. And we can expect some delay before we see tourism flourish once more, and with it the entire economy. Our travels this summer will probably have to be confined within the country – and perhaps even inside our homes – or our heads, as someone remarked.

But things may not be so bad, and we have hope – hope grounded in realism, grounded in the fact that the sun will always rise. Thanks to science and knowledge, we will overcome the pestilence, although we may find that we have to live with it for a long time. It is even possible that our volcanic eruption will prove to be stroke of good fortune, if everything continues to go well on the site. We have always known the value of good publicity.

My dear fellow-Icelanders. Easter is a festival of hope in the Christian calendar. It bodes brighter times ahead, with an ancient celebration of the sun rising in the sky. Let us enjoy what our wonderful country has to offer, enjoy what we have to offer each other in culture and the arts, in all our daily lives.

On behalf of Eliza and myself, I reiterate my good wishes and greetings to you all.

Happy Easter.