



Address
by President of Iceland
Guðni Th. Jóhannesson
at the End of Eruption Festival
in the Westman Islands
3 July 2023

Prime Minister,
Ambassadors,
Mayor,
other Westman Islanders,
ladies and gentlemen.

“At a meeting of the Westman Islands Civil Defence Committee on 3 July 1973, the following statement is approved: *In the judgement of experts and scientists, it is a fact that the crater is closed and volcanic activity in the mountain has ceased.*”

These are the opening words of a statement issued by the Civil Defence Committee for this town half a century ago. The eruption was over, nearly six months after a volcanic fissure had suddenly opened up near the place where we are now standing. Within hours, during the night of 22 January 1973, all the island’s population was successfully evacuated. But what would happen next? No-one could tell at that point how long the eruption would last, how much damage it might cause, whether or when the islanders would be able to return to their homes and workplaces.

All that uncertainty was succinctly summed up by President Kristján Eldjárn in an address to the nation on the first day of the eruption. He expressed the hopes and prayers of the entire nation that the community in the Westman Islands might survive to flourish once again. And in conclusion he spoke the words which were true then, and will hopefully always remain so: “We Icelanders are well aware, even without such a disaster as this, that our small nation is like a big family, whose members know that when any one of us faces an ordeal, we all face it together.”

My dear Westman Islanders, ladies and gentlemen: We now celebrate with joy in our hearts that the catastrophe came to an end. We mark the anniversary of the end of the eruption, and look to the future with high hopes.

We also recall now that some sixty years ago, an underwater eruption began and a new island was created, the island that was soon given the name Surtsey. Ever since, we have watched closely how flora and fauna have developed on the island.

At the beginning of this year many of us were gathered here on Heimaey island to mark the 50th anniversary of the beginning of the eruption. A torchlit parade took place from the church, Landakirkja; we passed under the lychgate with its powerful biblical inscription: *Because I live, ye shall live also*. During all those months when fire and brimstone rained down, the stone arch never disappeared under tephra.

On the parade, on that dark winter day, we saw each other in the glow of the flaming torches. We all felt, I believe, so strongly the unity that can reign here, the unity described so well by the president at the time, which I know that we Icelanders can still display in times of need.

In the days and weeks that followed, however, I found that people do not only want to remember the successes, what was well done. Those things, admittedly, stand out in memory: the unity, the perseverance, the hard toil and the ingenuity, not least the unprecedented methods of slowing down the lava flow – and also all the assistance provided on the mainland: housing in the short or longer term, jobs, new temporary fishing ports, whole school classes for children and youngsters.

We must feel gratitude for all this, and for the fact that only one life was lost in the months of the eruption. We also appreciate the support received from abroad: financial assistance, and provision of equipment, and of course respite holidays in the Nordic countries offered to boys and girls from the Westman Islands.

We are familiar with that story. At the time, fifty years ago, the people of Iceland kept up with all developments. News was reported from here, and in the lead was Árni Johnsen, a Westman Islander born and bred. In the intervening years we have collected narratives, documents and memories, some of them at the *Eldheimar* exhibition centre, where the story of the disastrous eruption and destruction, followed by the resurrection of the community, is told.

Yes, let us store up all that history, and tell it in all its nuances. In that way we can learn from it, and ensure that future generations will benefit from that experience, when next they face perils and ordeals.

But, my dear Westman Islanders! Now is the time for joy and celebration. The festivities have begun. Rejoicing comes naturally to the people of this fair island – and reasons to celebrate come along regularly. This year Westman Islanders won the Icelandic men’s handball championship; and perhaps the achievement was not due only to their skill in the sport. “In 1973 an eruption took place in the Westman Islands,” remarked one of the team after the victory. “People were digging and digging away at the tephra, and you couldn’t see any difference. But the community never stopped digging. That experience made this community stronger, and we never give up.”

Something similar is expressed by Margrét Lára Viðarsdóttir, one of Iceland’s best footballers ever: “I think in solutions, and I believe that I can deal with anything,” she once said, adding that in her view the Westman Islands are the most beautiful place in the world.

My dear friends: Far be it from me to challenge the words of this cherished daughter of the Westman Islands. Finally, I thank you for the hospitality and goodwill that my wife Eliza and I and our family have always enjoyed on the islands.

Happy End of Eruption Festival!