Speech by Achim Steiner, UN Under-Secretary General and UNEP Executive Director to the 6th International Convention on Environment and Development

Havana, Cuba 4 July 2007--Excellency, Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear colleagues,

I have been given 35 minutes to address you this morning on the issue of environment and development and the linkage to climate change. I have also been asked to address the question of what the latest developments in the United Nations and the multilateral system may imply for the work of UNEP.

However let me begin by thanking the Cuban authorities, my friends and colleagues here in the Ministry of Science Technology and Environment, and also the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for having made it possible for me to join you for this quite unique gathering.

It is a gathering that Cuba organizes regularly and it is certainly growing in terms of interest and popularity. Indeed this is one of the reasons why I was interested in coming to Cuba personally. To learn at first hand this linkage between environmental sustainability, economic development and social justice that is a key concern of Cuba's public policy.

As mentioned in your very kind and generous introduction, I am the son of a farmer and I grew up on a farm in Brazil before spending an important part of my life working in the field of rural development.

As the years passed I increasingly became convinced that if we talk about development--and development particularly for those who are not in the cities, who live in the rural areas and who are often the poorest in terms of modern access to services and resources--then understanding the role of environment in development is a foundation for achieving sustainable development.

I began my life professionally as an economist and as regional planner. In India and Pakistan I worked both with an NGO and then later with a government department.

It was in these roles that I first began to see with my very own eyes that if we failed to understand how poor rural communities are dependent on managing their environmental resources-- not simply from a survival point of view but from a livelihood and development point of view-- then all our efforts at bringing resources into the rural economy would on many occasions be wasted and sometimes would in fact undermine the very minimum of reliance that people have on these resources.

So in many ways, this is my headline for my address here today—managing the environmental dimension of sustainable development in the 21st century.

Let me begin by characterizing environmental thinking from the last century to this new one.

In the 20th Century, the environment and environmentalism was often associated with combating the negative out-comes of development. It was about pollution, it was about cleaning up something that had been left behind by industrialization or by unplanned agricultural development and it evolved into a kind of licensing and authorizing process of issuing permits and making fines on people who were not following regulations.

It was also about establishing protected areas. Society had not yet fully grasped an understanding of biodiversity, so instead we resorted to protecting some parts of the world from the 'blind' development which did not recognize the true costs of ecosystem and biodiversity loss.

Environment in the 20th Century was also about protecting specific ecosystems and locations be it a river basin, a wetland or a forest.

Ladies and gentlemen, we were struggling to try and bring the beginnings of a modern scientific understanding of ecology, biology and natural sciences to the basic challenge of managing development.

However, the focus is rapidly shifting as are the debates in Cuba, Latin America and the world at large. We no longer have the privilege of trying to save environmental assets on a local level, one by one, because we are today confronted with an environmental change phenomenon that is of a completely different quality and magnitude.

We have moved from the local degradation of natural resources to compromising the long term functionality of entire systems. Society, informed by modern ecological science, is only just opening its eyes to these connections and linking action, cause and effect.

There have been visionaries who, over the past century, have made these connections and gained insight into natural systems. But society in general is only just beginning to appreciate the wide ranging and systemic environmental change and the consequences that we are now facing in the 21st century.

Ladies and gentlemen, we have reached a point at which human beings are beginning to affect the entire climate system, the hydrological cycle and the nutrient cycle that in turn is affecting the productivity of soils to mention just 3 examples of systemic change.

We are also now affecting entire ecosystems in which the survival of species is threatened by human encroachment, over exploitation or simply lack of habitat.

Indeed we are facing an extinction crisis in terms of species on the planet which is unprecedented in history of nature as we know it today.

So when we talk about environmental dimensions of development in the 21st century are we only talking about rivers or forests or fish or wildlife? Or should we be beginning to

talk about the fact that environment is very the foundation of development and will increasingly define the development possibilities of the coming years, decades and centuries.

Currently, if you engage in discourse on modern economies and societies in terms of the environment, you are still too often confronted with a view that sustainability is a second order priority.

The debate goes something like:" Yes, environmental issues are important but we haven't got time because your concerns are about tomorrow's risks and we are concerned about today's problems…. you are looking at the luxury of a sustainable society when we are trying to feed our people and provide basic health services".

The other tension is between those who say we must protect our quality of life and our standard of living with environmental sustainability perceived as a threat to economic progress.

Well ladies and gentlemen; I am convinced that the discourse is already changing and that we are on the edge of a sea change in the evolution of environmental and developmental thinking.

A sea change in which the connection between ecological and environmental sustainability—locally, nationally and globally—and economics and economic development become indisputable.

Indeed, it is becoming increasingly clear that an investment in environmental sustainability is an investment in sustainable development and economic growth be it in Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean or North America, Europe and the Far East.

This evolution in thinking and this need for change is emerging at a time when crises are also occurring -- whether they be in Cuba in terms of electricity supply or in a country like Sudan. Here, in the last half century or so the desert has moved southward by up to 200km pushing pastoralists and farmers into more intense competition for increasingly scarce resources.

These crises can be drivers, focusing the mind and public attention but they can also lead to fast, imperfect and short term decision making and they can also increase tensions between different communities and in turn increase the likelihood of conflict.

Ladies and gentlemen, let me illustrate this point by dwelling for a moment on the Sudan in more detail. UNEP has just published a report which I believe holds lessons for the wider world.

The report finds that historical climatic change in the Sudan in the last 20 years has led to a continuous trend in declining rainfall of about 30%, again and as mentioned, being among the triggers that have led to the spread southwards of deserts..

You have also seen an increase in other factors such as an increase in livestock from around 30 million heads to over 130 million in just a few decades alongside rising human populations.

What the Sudan, and more specifically regions like Darfur are telling us is that rising consumption set against a landscape of rapid environmental change and declining productivity of the natural resource base is not a recipe for stability anywhere and is rapidly emerging as one of the greatest challenges of our time on a planet of 6.5 billion growing eventually to some ten billion.

Now I am fully conscious I am saying this standing here in Havana, Cuba where much of the discussion is about distributional justice and social justice.

Let me add that on these issues I am very much here to learn and to listen but also to suggest that within the discourse should be the understanding that the environment is also very much about justice and social justice.

Why social justice? Well environmental degradation usually implies greater vulnerability and it is the poorest of the poor who are first and foremost undermined in their livelihoods but also in their capacity to develop when their environmental assets are degraded--often in the interest of another part of society.

My work as Secretary General of the World Commission on Dams (WCD) provided me with numerous examples of this distributional challenge.

Often an ingenious engineering feat can produce fantastic benefits in terms of hydropower or water storage, irrigation and water supply. But very often these benefits are undermined by the blindness of a singular way of looking at development.

For when you dam a river, you firstly re-distribute the benefits of this freshwater system and re-allocate it from one group to another---you take it from the riparian community of a rural basin, you store it and then turn it into hydro power which in the main goes to the capital city or some other big urban area.

The reason why dams became so controversial towards the end of last century is that the distribution and the social justice dimension of dam building were frequently ignored.

Instead it was the stand point of the engineer that ruled the thinking with the river water seen as a wasted resource set to be lost to the sea unless captured and utilized via a dam.

What really was being lost was that a river is sustaining whole communities and in the process of re-distributing a vital environmental asset, often distributional equity and the productivity of a functioning river basin were simply ignored or dismissed as a trade-off.

Traveling around the world with the WCD, we looked at a dam like Kariba for example in Zambia and Zimbabwe.

30 years after that dam was built to generate electricity, the communities forcibly moved in order to make way for this dam had still not been given electricity. It is a story that has been repeated across the globe.

So when we talk about environmental dimensions of sustainable development we are also talking about social justice and we are also talking about the challenge of the equitable distribution of the benefits of development.

But we also must realize that environmental degradation is not a luxury that highly developed or richer societies should begin to think about when they have reached a certain level of development. It is in fact the foundation for a more just and sustainable development process altogether.

Perhaps you, the audience here today, do not find this all so surprising. But I am sure that when you try and explain environmental sustainability to finance and planning ministers it remains a considerable challenge.

Indeed we still find ourselves in international fora like the United Nations in the regrettable situation where environment and development are codified language for two seemingly separate world views.

Very often the environment is used in the international arena as something that developed countries have as their vested interest meaning that developing countries should exercise a great deal of caution.

This in turn leads to the clichéd view that Europeans and North Americans and the rest of the developed world care about the environment but developing countries do not.

However, one of the privileges of being Executive Director of UNEP is that one travels to many places and hears many different voices. It has strengthened my conviction that many developing countries and their citizens do care passionately about the environment and environmental sustainability.

It is not confined to specific countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America of the Caribbean. Indeed whether it is Brazil, China, Cuba or a country like Kenya, I see an immense concern at the local and national level for environmental problems.

Yet when we come to talk to each other as nation states on a global level, we seem to lose our ability to converse about a common concept of environment, or the environmental dimension of sustainable development, in a way that allows our international system to evolve effectively.

Let met turn now for a moment to the issue of climate change which you covered in your deliberation yesterday.

This year, as a result of the work of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), we now have the level of scientific certainty that finally allows the international debate to move on from trying to understand a phenomenon to being able to talk about the consequences and our response.

These consequences present us with an historic challenge. For we now understand that climate change is also the most dramatic, the most far reaching and the most deeply unsettling threat to life as we know it today on this planet.

If you have doubts about that then do take a moment to look at some of the other IPCC reports also published this year.

Some scientists consider these trends, put forward by the IPCC, underplay the full extent of likely environmental change as a result of global warming. But these reports are the best validated and agreed state of knowledge that we have.

And what they tell us is that only a truly global response, involving 190 plus nations working together, will enable us to address the challenge of climate change.

Global because it is now abundantly clear that, for the first time in the history of human-kind, we are faced with an environmental change phenomenon that is global in nature, global in terms of its impacts and indeed can only be addressed in terms of global responses.

It is perhaps the challenge of the 21st century that will in many ways transform the way that we look at our ability as nations states and communities to work together in a different way than we have been willing or able to do in the past.

Ladies and gentlemen, these are the threats and the challenges but what of the opportunities?

Well I believe that climate change is, from the point of view of an environmental perspective of development, also an extraordinary opportunity.

Extraordinary because it provides us for the first time with a transformational issue that touches literally every aspect of our lives, of our economies and indeed of our societies.

Some people are concerned that we may be focusing too much climate change and thus becoming distracted from other pressing issues like the destruction of ecosystems to rural development and poverty alleviation.

I believe they would be right if we allowed climate change to become just another issue along many other issues that we have to confront on this planet. But climate change is not

just another issue. It is a transformational one because what it implies touches on virtually all aspects of our economies.

One is that the time-scale is tight. We have only a few years to mould modern economies particularly industrialized ones, into economies that can stabilize C02 emissions to a point where climate change will not escalate even further.

In order to achieve this level of mitigation, every aspect of our modern economies will have to respond from energy, transport, infrastructure, health systems and education.

We have to face the fact that, even if only part of what the IPCC predicts over the next 30 - 100 years happens it will change the fundamentals of lives, of livelihoods and economic activity for more than a billion people.

Let me just quote one example which I find very sobering. The IPCC now estimates that somewhere in 30-50 years virtually all the major glaciers in the Himalayas could have melted.

These are integral parts of a functioning ecosystem including an economy that has grown around the water storage and water release functions that directly affect over half a billion people downstream plus another 250 million people indirectly.

Let me take another example because the consequences of glacial melting are also giving rise to completely unexpected phenomena: namely the emergence of glacial lakes.

These lakes, forming and growing as a result of the melting are beginning to trigger floods raising the threat of millions or billions of cubic metres of water being suddenly discharged down vulnerable valleys.

A country like Bhutan is among those in the Himalayas confronted with what are now called GLOFs-- Glacial Lake Outburst Floods.

They are the equivalent of a major explosion occurring in a dam wall and releasing masses of water at frightening speeds down narrow valleys in the Himalayas where communities have settled for hundreds of years and have developed their agriculture, their villages and their towns.

A country like Bhutan has no responsibility for global warming yet here it is at the forefront of confronting the consequences of global warming.

In Cuba you are also beginning to confront some of the potential consequences of global warming. Yesterday we were at the National Metrological Service and I saw the maps plotting the hurricanes in the Caribbean. The IPCC estimates that extreme weather events will intensify as a result of climate change.

While we may still discuss whether hurricanes are increasing or intensifying as result of climbing greenhouse gas emissions it would seem prudent to prepare for all kinds of extreme weather events.

Until recently however, the international discussion on climate change was viewed primarily as a developed, industrialized country problem because the industrialized nations bear responsibility for the lion's share of the CO2 emissions and thus the global warming.

But in the last 12 months or so it has also risen to become a concern of the developing world too.

Let me explain why. UNEP, as I am sure you know, is headquartered in Nairobi Kenya. What are the consequences for a Continent like Africa in the context of climate change—not in 100 or 200 years time but here and now and in the years and decades to come?

What are the consequences for Continents where climate change is happening faster and faster, whose countries have the least responsibility for the global warming underway and where the resources for adapting to the impacts are very scarce?

Assisting developing countries with adaptation was, at least in some minds, initially viewed as an alibi for industrialized nations to avoid the responsibility of reducing CO2 emissions.

However it has now become a major preoccupation for if the world does not adapt rapidly we not only put more lives at risk but also expose core elements of the global economy to what may prove to be unaffordable and devastating risks.

Take the dam example or much of the infrastructure along river systems or on the coastline. Dams are designed on a hydrological cycle and on empirical models that are based on 100 year floods and on a certain amount of rain data determining likely flows.

But these baselines and calculations for designing infrastructure could be rendered irrelevant within 10-30 years as a result of climate change in both developed and developing countries.

Take for example the United Kingdom in recent days. Two days of rain resulting in 1 billion dollars of damage due to flooding.

Take hurricanes: I recently read the cost to the Cuban economy of each one that has affected this island.

Indeed if you begin to add all this money together you begin to understand why one of the earliest corporate sectors to take a hard look at climate change was the insurance and re-insurance sector.

Companies like Swiss Re and Munich Re and other big insurers could see that climate change might affect their business because underwriting the risks for infrastructure was becoming so unpredictable that they might be forced to refuse traditional areas of insurance business.

That is why for the last 10 years it has been some of the world's major insurance companies who have been at the forefront in the private sector in terms of promoting research and modeling of the impacts of climate change on infrastructure and on economies.

Let me give you another statistic. By the end of the century, if we experience the kind of sea level rise that is now anticipated, 30% of Africa's coastal infrastructure could be affected including cities, ports, urban settlements, power stations, industries and tourism developments.

So when we talk about climate change today we must recognize the inescapable logic of the need for global action.

We need to work together as a global community to bring down the emissions of CO2 into our atmosphere and we must do it urgently.

Secondly we have a major challenge at the national level of protecting the development assets of nations. Because without clear adaptation planning and clear adaptation investments and actions we are putting at risk the assets of our national economies.

Thirdly is the question of mobilizing solidarity--solidarity in a global community where responsibility for the problem rests with one group but the consequences are shared equally or unequally by the entire community of nations.

Ladies and gentlemen, I believe that the United Nations and multilateralism really are the best hope we have for engaging competing and conflicting economic and political interests at this point in history.

I believe the UN offers us all the chance to broker a response to climate change that would allow us to all move together in a way that no nation can do on its own-- not even a nation like the United States of America or indeed the Peoples Republic of China or the European Union for that matter.

The UN has already given us a start, brokering collective action under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Kyoto Protocol.

The next critical test of our collective ability to take the necessary next steps, beyond 2012, will be at the climate change convention meeting in Bali, Indonesia, in December.

Failure in Bali is a scenario that cannot be entertained. Because if we lose the framework for action under the climate convention, if we lose this platform to respond, we will lose

for the foreseeable future any hope of having the principles of collective action, of solidarity, of transfer of technology and of financial support being mobilized on the scale that we need.

At the global level we will also be faced with the challenge of what one might call the 'political economics' of climate change--industrialized nations such as the United States arguing that it is politically and economically impossible to meet new emission reduction targets and a rapidly developing one like China stating that development comes before the issue of emission reductions.

Such polarized positions are untenable in terms of making progress on climate change and in my view are unlikely to be maintained for much longer. Unlikely because in capitals across the world, from Beijing to Washington, many people are looking at these issues from beyond the purely foreign policy or ideological view but from increasingly common stand points.

In the United States it is the public and corporations with international interests that are changing America's climate change policy and the position of the administration towards a global consensus.

Meanwhile China, now one of the world's biggest emitters, is also responding in quite historic ways. A few weeks ago China released its own climate change strategy and very openly laid out what China is in fact already attempting to do to address its own emissions footprint.

China also outlined how it views responding to climate change as an issue of national interest and of national responsibility for instance in the areas of energy efficiency.

But China also made it clear that its degree of response to climate change is contingent upon the industrialized world's response.

Ladies and gentlemen, when you look at this wide landscape you now see that nations are talking not about paralysis in the international negotiations, but more about the conditions for action in a step by step way.

The United Nations is not always seen as the most efficient or the most effective vehicle that we have in this world. But this should not distract from the inescapable necessity of having a multilateral system that allows an equitable, progressive but also functionally effective system of global environmental governance to emerge.

It also has unique strengths. It is a vital part of knowledge sharing, it is an institution that sets the norms and standards—yes, sometimes reflecting the inequities of our world today-- but also opening new opportunities to try to regulate access to technology and trying to provide a protective set norms and standards for the more vulnerable.

Let me just give you the example of toxic waste. Last year you will all have heard about the toxic waste incident in Cote d'Ivoire. Here tons and tons of toxic waste were dumped around the city of Abidjan in a fly by night operation.

The international community sent an emergency team to assist cope with the immediate response but then withdrew. Cote d'Ivoire was left with a bill of some 32 million Euros to dig up the soil in the city of Abidjan, load it onto a ship and to take it to France where the toxic waste could be disposed.

Cote D'Ivoire, just emerging from a civil war, was paying for an act of irresponsible and illegal waste dumping going against the principle and intent of the international norms and standards under the Basel Convention on the movement of trans boundary hazardous waste.

The case is a good one underlining how the UN can be a vehicle for protecting people against the under belly or the dark side of a global economy in which accountability is increasingly difficult to ensure.

It is also a case in point of how the UN can mobilize resources because eventually countries began assisting Cote D'Ivoire with the clean up costs just before a shipping company settled out of court.

UN treaties have also mobilized resources in novel and creative ways. One example here would be the Clean Development Mechanism of the Kyoto Protocol.

The CDM has had some growing pains but, it is set to generate an additional $100 billion of financial resources—equal to the entire international aid budget-- invested in developing countries for facilitating the transition to a low carbon economy.

From the standpoint of UNEP, I would now like the climate convention to move with stronger conviction in the area of technology transfer. Indeed, moving internationally on the twin track of mitigation and action on adaptation action requires us to find new solutions to the technology transfer question.

Ladies and gentlemen, on aspect of the debate seen too often in the international media tis he headline of "look at China -- one coal fire powered station a week. Isn't it terrible".

Such propagandist headlines fail to tell the full story of China or appreciate the full challenge of climate change. It is also another argument for an international system that puts incontrovertible facts on the table rather than speculation and political gamesmanship.

This point leads me back to the IPCC—perhaps one of the most remarkable examples of "incontrovertible fact finding and fact giving".

It was established by UNEP and the UN World Meteorological Organization at a time when some countries hotly contested the scientific validity of global warming.

Today and as a result of irrefutable, reliable and an inclusive scientific process, the IPCC has brought climate change and its links to human activity to the point at which no government contests the findings.

So environmentalism-- or environment in sustainable development in the 21st century—will increasingly require a fully functioning multilateral system.

What does this mean for the institutions that make up the UN? In a sense the environment arm of the UN is no different to a government environment ministry.

You cannot practically or logically handle all sectors in order to realize sustainable agriculture, sustainable transport or say sustainable energy.

An environment minister's principal role is to bring the best know how, hard hitting monitoring system and innovative policy solutions to bear upon the decisions of the Cabinet as a whole.

So it should be in the UN. The Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) must have the role and responsibility to promote sustainable food and agriculture, fisheries and forestry.

It is the responsibility of UN Industrial and Development Organization to ensure the sustainability issues are part of its core in promoting industrial development.

However you do need within the UN family a strong, effective and also well resourced United Nations Environment Programme because without it the knowledge that we are accumulating on best practices, on science and on difference approaches would not be heard.

If your question is how to, for example, maximize fisheries or agricultural production you are not going to get the same answers from UNEP and the FAO—together however, we can provide much richer and wider-ranging responses.

So to my mind UNEP is in the first instance the environment programme of the United Nations family and our responsibility is to work with the entire United Nations family to ensure that member states get the right balance of expertise.

So when you talk to the World Health Organization about DDT, you do not just get the answer that it is an excellent chemical for killing mosquitoes.

You also get the common and agreed answer that DDT must be used selectively and that efforts must be stepped up to find more and more widely applicable alternatives to this 'chemical sledge hammer'..

Secondly the role of UNEP in the future will, I believe, be to ensure that environmental knowledge becomes a driver for economic development.

This is because the future of our economies is predicated upon a different understanding of how we use the natural resource base and manage better the environmental conditions for not only production of commodities, but also for sustainable livelihoods and ultimately true human well being.

I sincerely believe that this is being increasingly understood and realized—that the shift from the last century to this one will be an understanding that industrial development and economic development cannot set prices and develop cost-benefit calculations in which environmental assets are perceived as endlessly available and without value.

I think we are already moving forward on this front and coming ever closer to being able to capture not only the intrinsic value of nature and of environmental assets but to understand the full economic implications of our eco systems and their goods and service that they provide to us everyday.

I would like to end by saying that my visit to Cuba has given me reasons for optimism--optimism because I believe that in some respects the discussions here have put the concept of the sustainable economy right in the centre of the debate about what kind of future we collectively seek..

Whether it be the using (or not using) of river basins for hydro power, the need for energy efficiency not just energy generation, the importance of investing in protected areas, in environmental education and in understanding the implications of extreme weather events be they hurricanes or floods, changing rainfall patterns and droughts.

Ladies and gentlemen, if we understand the environment not to be something out of the main stream of our economy but rather to be a central building block of long term economic development then I believe the 21st century could truly be an extraordinary one.

Instead of being a century of environmental crisis and doom, it could well prove to be an extraordinary opportunity for ten billion people to live together in peace and better human and natural living conditions than many may have imagined when we left the 20th century just seven years ago.

Thank you