

Remarks by Achim Steiner, UN Under Secretary General and Executive Director, UN Environment Programme (UNEP)

Opening of the 26th Session of the UNEP Governing Council/Global Ministerial Environment Forum

21 February 2011

HE Mwai Kibaki; President of the Republic of Kenya,

Acting President of the GC, the Honourable Henry Djombo, Minister of Forests, Environment and Sustainable Development, Republic of Congo,

Honourable George Saitoti , the Kenyan Minister of Internal Security and acting Minister of Foreign Affairs,

Honourable John Michuki, Kenyan Minister of the Environment,

Honourable Ministers, Distinguished Delegates,

UN Under-Secretary General and Head of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Sha Zukang,

UN Under-Secretary General and Executive Director of UN-Habitat, Joan Clos,

Edward Norton, award-winning actor and UN Goodwill Ambassador for Biodiversity,

Members of the Diplomatic and UN Communities,

Representatives of major groups, civil society and the private sector,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Welcome to the United Nations headquarters in Africa—the HQs of UNEP and UN-Habitat and numerous agencies and programmes.

Welcome too to a country where under this coalition government some of the 'green shoots' of a world-wide transition to a Green Economy are being glimpsed and formulated.

From the expansion of geothermal in the rift valley; to wind power in Turkana and the restoration and conservation initiatives linked with the Mau forest complex and other water towers.

The two themes for UNEP's Governing Council/Global Ministerial Forum are the Green Economy, in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication.

And also International Environment Governance.

Two themes that look forward to the UN Conference on Sustainable Development 2012 or Rio+20 in May next year.

The next 12 months promise to be an exciting and intense time for the international discourse surrounding how to achieve sustainable development in the 21st century.

Driving this debate are the realities of a world remarkably changed from the world of the Rio Earth Summit of 1992.

- Concentrations of CO₂ in the atmosphere in 1992 were around 356 parts per million—today they stand at close to 390 ppm.
- Populations of fish and freshwater vertebrates have declined on average by nearly 50 per cent since 1987 as compared with an around 30 per cent decline for terrestrial and marine species
- Some 20 years ago around a fifth of fish stocks were deemed over-exploited; this has now risen to about 40 per cent
- Land degradation now affects perhaps a quarter of the Earth's surface to varying extents, and has been growing by maybe around one per cent a year since the 1980s

- Population has grown from around 5.8 billion in the early 1990s to close to 6.7 billion now.
- In the 1990s there were over 670 million, cars, trucks, buses and other vehicles in the world—today there are over 750 million
- In the early 1990's some two billion people had no access to electricity, today it stands at 1.3 billion.

But some indicators have moved in a more positive direction.

- Protected areas have for example grown from around 8.6 per cent in 1992 to over 12 per cent

And sometimes we collectively underestimate how fast and how quickly transitions can occur with the right public policies and smart measures and incentives to the private sector.

Many may have smiled in 1992 if one had suggested that 17.5 GW of solar photo-voltaics would be installed in one year. But that happened in 2010.

- PV installations are forecast to rise further this year, by perhaps 20.5GW, taking global capacity to around 50 GW – the equivalent of around 15 nuclear reactors.

So this is among the challenges of this GC/GMEF and Rio+20—how to scale up and accelerate these transitions—how to foster the bottom up, but also a top where these transitions can in a sense aim.

In a way that delivers positive economic and social outcomes but in a way that decouples humanity's footprint from the current unsustainable exploitation of finite and highly productive natural and nature-based assets.

UNEP, along with other agencies in the UN system, are acting in this direction in its back yard as it were.

As part of the UN Secretary General's *Greening the Blue*, UNEP became the first UN body to publish a climate neutral strategy in September 2010.

If you have an opportunity to stop by the new offices of UNEP and UN-Habitat, then you will see a highly concrete and visible example of this work.

The block is energy neutral—powered by solar panels on the roof and incorporating features such as low energy computers and natural ventilation systems.

It challenges the received wisdom that such buildings and technologies are only possible in developed economies.

We have extended an open invitation to local and regional architects and designers, city planners and urban strategists to inspire further energy neutral buildings in Africa and beyond.

Another first is the way we will conduct this meeting—paperless, or paper lean to perhaps be more precise.

I would like to thank the Government of Qatar for making this possible and pioneering the concept at a meeting of the Montreal Protocol in 2008.

The aim is to reduce the amount of paper used during the meeting by 90% from 2009 levels, when over 2.5 million sheets of paper were printed for and by meeting participants.

We have therefore made all conference documents available electronically and encourage you to access them from your laptops and avoid printing where possible.

I hope you will also notice other green measures here this week.

We are avoiding the unnecessary use of bottled water by providing water dispensers.

We would also encourage delegates to use the recycling bins which we have made available for paper, glass and plastic waste.

Lastly, we invite you to discover more about the green elements of our new building through our green quiz.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

We live in some of the most challenging times that perhaps any generation has faced, but also one of the most exciting moments where the possibilities of re-shaping and re-focusing towards a sustainable 21st century have never been more tangible.

Some of you may have been in Rio in 1992, others like I watched from a distance: in my case Zimbabwe where I was on a new stage of my career—it was for certain an extraordinary moment in world history: a landmark, an important foundation.

As a result of your deliberations, decisions and guidance this week, we can provide some of the building blocks towards advancing what a previous generation of leaders, ministers and members of civil society conceived.

In doing so, you as ministers responsible for the environment can make your unique and central contribution towards making Rio 2012 an equally, if not even more notable moment in human affairs.

Issues I look forward to expanding upon in my Policy Statement later this morning.

Thank you