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**MESSAGE ON WORLD ENVIRONMENT DAY**

**5 June 2007**

World Environment Day 2007 focuses on the challenges facing the people and ecosystems of the Arctic and Antarctic as a result of rapid environmental and climatic change. In doing so it also links to the wider world where glaciers are shrinking and an increasing number of extreme weather events are triggering more frequent droughts and floods.

In focusing on the polar regions we hold up a mirror to the accelerating impacts sweeping the whole planet from the release of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. These seemingly remote regions vividly illustrate the interconnectedness of all life on Earth—bringing home to the six billion people alive today how mutually reliant and linked we all are to landscapes and ecosystems both near and far.

The Arctic and Antarctica may be the Earth's climate early warning system—feeling the heat first—but we know it does not end there. Ocean circulation, the key driver of regional and global weather systems, is inextricably linked with melting and freezing processes in and around the poles. The polar regions are also a kind of protective shield, reflecting heat back into space that would otherwise be absorbed on Earth. There is also growing concern over so-called 'positive feedbacks' including the potential release of massive amounts of the powerful greenhouse gas methane, which is stored in the Arctic permafrost.

So, what happens in the Arctic and the Antarctic as a result of climate change is of direct interest to us all—from someone living in the Congo River Basin, the Australian outback and in rural China, to suburban dwellers in Berlin, New Delhi, Rio de Janeiro or Washington DC.

At the same time, the actions of those living outside the polar regions is of direct interest to Arctic peoples. The vast majority of emissions that are contributing to melting ice are being generated on the roads and in the factories, homes and offices of the industrialized and, increasingly, the rapidly industrializing economies.

We are currently locked into a vicious and ever widening circle. Our common responsibility is to make it a virtuous one—to underline that overcoming the profligate burning of fossil fuels is not a burden but an opportunity. Switching to a cleaner and more efficient development path can not only liberate us from the

overarching threat of climate change, it can free us from dependency on a finite and, some might say, politically disruptive resource.

There are signs that this switch can—and is indeed starting to—occur as result of several central factors finally coming into play. Firstly the economics of inaction and the economic benefits of action have in recent months moved to the fore. A review by Sir Nicholas Stern, published in advance of the climate convention talks held in Nairobi in late 2006, has changed the landscape forever in this respect. It states that if no action is taken, we risk raising average global temperatures by more than 5 degrees Centigrade from pre-industrial levels, and this would lead to the equivalent of a minimum loss of 5 per cent of GDP annually.

In contrast, the costs of acting to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to avoid the worst impacts could cost as little as 1 per cent of global GDP each year. A major US accountancy firm recently concluded that the world would have to sacrifice just one year's economic growth over the next four decades to reduce carbon emissions sufficiently to curb global warming.

The Stern Review also estimates that reducing emissions would actually make the world better off. One estimate indicates that, over time, a shift to a low carbon global economy would trigger benefits of \$2.5 trillion a year. Findings like this take climate change beyond the portfolio of the environment minister and firmly into the in-tray of the world's finance ministers and heads of state.

The second factor is the issue of energy security—or, one might say, energy insecurity—due to the global dependence on fossil fuels. Countries are increasingly recognizing that the benefits of renewable energy sources, low- or zero-emission coal-fired power stations and energy efficiency extend beyond the atmosphere to national security.

Others are also starting to grasp another notion of security, which includes the link between extreme weather events like floods and droughts to wider national and regional issues.

Climate change is magnifying existing disparities between rich and poor and aggravating tensions over fragile or increasingly scarce natural resources such as productive land and freshwater. It increases the potential to create a new class of displaced people known collectively as environmental refugees.

You do not have to take my word for that. Cristina Narbona, the Spanish environment minister, was asked at the recent climate change talks why her country was investing in a new partnership between UNEP and the UN Development Programme (UNDP) to assist Africa adapt to climate change. Her response was clear. Spain links the increasing numbers of people from Africa who are risking life and limb in flimsy boats to sail to the Canary Islands with environmental degradation including those from climate change.

Finally the science of climate change is now indisputable, and has been further underlined in the latest reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released in February this year. The findings put a full stop behind the scientific debate

as to whether humankind is influencing the climate and now beg the question of what we are going to do about it.

Collective and decisive political will is the final—and still missing—piece in the jigsaw puzzle. While many sectors of society are moving to address climate change—including local authorities, industry, the financial sector and civil society—the collective political process is moving frustratingly slowly.

At the climate change meeting in Nairobi some steps were taken under the auspices of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. UNEP and UNDP's just-mentioned new partnership aims to assist developing countries to secure a share of the clean energy projects that are starting to flow from the Kyoto Protocol's Clean Development Mechanism. It will also offer a rapid response so countries in sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere can insulate their economies against climate changes that are already underway.

Furthermore, the Kyoto Protocol's Adaptation Fund was agreed, and there were other positive signs, not least on issues like avoided deforestation where there was productive and fulsome debate. However, no agreement was achieved on the deep and sustained cuts in greenhouse gas emissions needed to stabilize the atmosphere, an agreement which is also vital for maintaining confidence and investment in the blossoming carbon markets. If Nairobi was not the place, then where and when will this action on deeper cuts in a post-2012 world emerge?

It was John Tyndall, the English physicist, who recognized the power of carbon dioxide and water vapour to change the Earth's climate. That was over 100 years ago in his seminal paper of 1863. We cannot wait another 100 years to act. Indeed there are some respected observers who claim we have as little as a decade or so to do so. Six months from now, on the Indonesian island of Bali, governments will resume the climate talks. I sincerely hope that Bali will be the watershed where science, security issues and economics combine to produce wide-ranging political action.

The theme for this year's World Environment Day is *Melting Ice: A Hot Topic?* Thus it is fitting that the main celebrations are being hosted by Norway on the edge of the Arctic Circle. The logo underlines the global theme by asking a polar bear, an African farmer, a Pacific islander, an insurer and businessman, two indigenous children and ultimately 'Yourself' the rhetorical question of whether indeed this is the topic of our time.

Perhaps we should have added a further person—namely a politician. World Environment Day has at its heart the empowerment of the individual citizen. UNEP urges everyone to embrace this year's theme and put the question to their political leaders and democratically elected representatives: just how much hotter does this topic need to become before governments across the globe commit to acting together?

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