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**Statement by
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TO THE OPENING SESSION OF THE INTERGOVERNMENTAL
PREPARATORY MEETING FOR THE 17TH SESSION OF
THE COMMISSION ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT
New York, 23 February 2009**

Madame Chairperson, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honour and a privilege to address you at the opening of the Intergovernmental Preparatory Meeting for the 17th Session of the Commission on Sustainable Development.

We meet at a critical moment in world history.

Several challenges threaten progress towards sustainable development goals. The spike in food and energy prices last year led to a severe food security crisis. The subsequent collapse of energy prices has eased some of the pressure. Yet, food prices remain high. And the global financial and economic crisis has exacerbated the situation. Forecasts suggest that this year could produce the worst economic record since the end of the Second World War. Growth rates are falling everywhere. Unemployment is rising. Poverty is deepening. Hunger and malnutrition are on the increase again. And the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals is in jeopardy.

On top of the other challenges, we face the threat of climate change.

As the Secretary-General recently reminded us, in his acceptance speech for the Sustainable Development Leadership Award in New Delhi, failure to combat climate change will only increase poverty and hardship. It will destabilize economies, breed insecurity in many countries, and undermine our efforts to achieve sustainable development. That is why he has made climate change the top priority for the work of the Organization in 2009.

These multi-dimensional challenges do not have purely economic solutions, nor purely social or environmental ones. They require integrated solutions that combine economic, social, and environmental elements. Such solutions can come only from the framework of sustainable development.

Now is the time for the champions of sustainable development to step forward.

Sustainable development embodies the aspiration for a planetary civilization. It holds the fundamental values of the human race to be sacrosanct – not subject to trade-off or compromise.

It is a vision that respects the limits of the finite planet that sustains our life.

A vision that supports the aspirations of all human beings for a more prosperous and less vulnerable life.

A vision that rejects, as utterly unacceptable, the enormous poverty and social inequity, both within and between nations.

And it is a vision that demands our determined pursuit of all three of these values, equally and at the same time.

This integrated vision is the essence of sustainable development.

The coining of this term by the Brundtland Commission 22 years ago, in 1987, was a major contribution by the United Nations. Five years later, in 1992, we agreed upon Agenda 21 to operationalize this term – and established the Commission on Sustainable Development to watch over its achievement.

The crises that we now confront make clear the wisdom of the decisions taken 17 years ago. This puts a new responsibility on the Commission to provide the leadership and guidance that the world needs today.

So, dear colleagues, our task during this week is two-fold. First, to lay the foundation for the discussions at the Commission's 17th Session in May, in such a way that concrete and meaningful results can be obtained on the current themes. Second, to demonstrate the relevance of sustainable development to addressing the multiple crises we face. The goal we must set for ourselves this week is to reach a common understanding of the complex inter-linkages among these thematic areas and with the larger context.

The themes on the Commission's agenda this year are at the core of the sustainable development agenda: agriculture, rural development, land, drought, desertification, and Africa. Each provides an entry point for addressing the food crisis. Each is central to the pursuit of the MDGs. Each is affected adversely by climate change as well as the global recession. And the policy responses in each of these agenda areas can contribute to the solutions of these global challenges.

This is not the first time we are discussing these issues or trying to find solutions. But the context has changed dramatically. It would not be enough simply to repeat earlier decisions. We must set our ambitions high, to carry the process forward.

A more integrated sustainable development policy framework is needed, in order to diversify economies, develop climate friendly development pathways, reduce dependence on a few commodity exports, protect the resource base that supports economic activity, and benefit

from technological change. The necessary policy changes will require significant resources for public investment in economic and social infrastructure.

Madame Chairperson, distinguished delegates,

I would like to briefly mention some of the actions undertaken by the Department of Economic and Social Affairs to organize technical and expert inputs for your discussions. All of these are listed on the newly revamped website of DESA's Division for Sustainable Development, which I encourage you to visit.

Foremost amongst these is the publication of the Reports of the Secretary-General on the key themes before the Commission.

Second, the website provides access to several important databases. These include case studies of successful sustainable development actions, a compendium of national sustainable development strategies, and a large database on civil society and major group institutions that support and participate in the sustainable development agenda.

Finally, we organized two intersessional meetings, bringing together experts and policymakers: one in Bangkok in January, organized jointly with the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) and the UN Water Programme on Capacity Building; and the second, a Ministerial-level meeting, co-organized with the Government of Namibia, in Windhoek earlier this month, with financial support from the Government of the Netherlands and the Government of Japan.

The outcomes of these two important events will be presented in a moment, and the documents are also available on our website.

Madame Chairperson, distinguished delegates,

I am told that the comet Lu-Lin, first discovered by one of my compatriots two years ago, will pass close to the Earth today and will be visible for the next few weeks. In Chinese myths, comets were considered to be celestial messengers, providing warnings and foretelling events. I hope that we will see the confluence of crises as celestial messengers, alerting us to the need to recover our commitment to sustainable development and to put this commitment swiftly into action. There is no time to waste.

We look to this Commission on Sustainable Development to initiate strong and decisive actions to address the extraordinary challenges we face. To lift millions out of poverty, to protect our natural heritage, to prevent future food crises from ever happening, to address climate change, and to show the world the path to a better future.

I wish you a very productive and successful week ahead.

Thank you.