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THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

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MESSAGE ON INTERNATIONAL YOUTH DAY

12 August 2003

As we celebrate this fourth International Youth Day, the global economy is going through a period of uncertainty. Rising unemployment takes a heavy toll among young people who are particularly vulnerable to shocks in the labour market. Lay-offs, restructuring and insufficient opportunities to enter the world of work condemn many to a life of economic hardship and despair. We have seen, all too often, the tragedy of young lives misspent in crime, drug abuse, civil conflict and even terrorism.

Youth unemployment is a problem that affects all countries. The International Labour Organization estimates that some 74 million young people are currently out of work. In the next ten years, more than one billion will enter the working age population. While this new generation is more educated than any previous one, these young people will continue to face many obstacles in their search for jobs.

We must develop strategies that give young people everywhere a real chance to find decent and productive work that will allow them to become independent and responsible global citizens. This involves promoting employability, equal opportunities, entrepreneurship and employment creation for youth all over the world.

As part of the global partnership for development that was set as one of the Millennium Development Goals, I have formed a Youth Employment Network and appointed a high-level Panel to prepare a set of policy recommendations. At its second meeting on 30 June and 1 July in Geneva, the Panel challenged all countries to translate the excellent policy work in this field into effective action at the country level.

Drawing on the expertise of the ILO and the World Bank, the Network and its country partners will develop national action plans on youth employment. I fully support the Network's aim to mobilize financial resources for youth employment, to build bridges between school and work, and to invite youth organizations to play an active role in the design and implementation of national action plans.

Young people should never be seen as a burden on any society, but as its most precious asset. As one of the Panel members rightly stressed, unemployment is the problem; youth is the solution. On this International Youth Day, let us ensure that young people everywhere are given the opportunity to contribute to the development and the progress of their societies.

Kofi A. Annan