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SECRETARY-GENERAL SAYS HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL ATTENTION HAS BEEN DIVERTED

FROM KEY CHALLENGES OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Calling for Balanced International Agenda,
He Tells Commission It Must Be Fearless Watchdog in Sounding Alarm

The following is the text of Secretary-General Kofi Annan's remarks to The United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development in New York today, 28 April:

I would like to thank the many ministers and other stakeholders who have gathered for this session. It is encouraging to know that you represent a broad range of portfolios, and not just environment or development ministries. That mindset -- that awareness of linkages and cross-cutting concerns -- is just what we need if we are to achieve sustainable development.

As of now, our progress towards that goal is at best uneven.

On the positive side, important agreements have been adopted, most notably the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation. New and binding international conventions are entering into force, for example, on persistent organic pollutants and on rules for international trade in pesticides and other hazardous chemicals. The developing countries capacity has been strengthened in many areas. Official development assistance has risen after a long decline. Partnerships have expanded, as have corporate social responsibility initiatives. And awareness of what sustainable development means has deepened -- in particular, the crucial understanding that it rests on three pillars: not just environmental protection, but also social progress and economic development.

Yet key challenges remain. The natural resource base is under siege. Unsustainable patterns of consumption and production are still the norm. Progress in slowing deforestation and biodiversity loss has been glacial. The AIDS epidemic is an enormous and still growing burden. The global trading system, including economically and environmentally harmful subsidies, remains biased against developing countries, hampering their efforts to rise out of poverty. Vulnerable small islands States face enormous threats; some may not survive at all. Unless the United States or the Russian Federation ratifies the Kyoto Protocol, we cannot fully and properly address the issue of climate change.

As if all that wasn't enough, high-level political attention has been diverted from sustainable development by the recent emphasis given to terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, and the war in Iraq. However understandable that focus might be, we cannot lose any more time, or ground, in the wider struggle for human well-being. Just as we need balanced development, so do we need a balanced international agenda.

Your session is focusing on some of the central aspects of that agenda: water, sanitation and human settlements. In those aspects, perhaps more than in any other area of sustainable development, we see the linkages that make our work at once so complex and yet so filled with potential.

Water is intimately linked with education and gender equality. Girls who have to spend time gathering water for the family tend not to be in school. And where schools have sanitation, attendance is higher, especially for girls. Water is connected to health, since millions of children get sick and die every year from water-borne diseases and for lack of basic sanitation and hygiene.

It is linked to environmental protection, since poor water management degrades and squanders a precious resource. It is linked to the urbanization of poverty, since rural impoverishment rooted in water and land-tenure issues drives people to migrate to already crowded cities — and most often to their growing slums. Tensions over water could even generate conflict, within and across borders, although water also offers great opportunities for cooperation.

So the stakes are high. Without an integrated approach, we could face a tangle of problems. But with one, we could generate a cascade of progress. Let us remember, though, that however much can be done at the international level — through aid and partnerships, for example -- ultimately action on water, sanitation and settlements must be national and local: effective public administration, inclusive governance that involves communities and a real commitment to equity.

These issues need greater prominence, globally and locally. It was with that in mind that last month I announced the formation of an Advisory Board on Water and Sanitation. The Board is meant to complement existing efforts, not to supplant them. Chaired by former Prime Minister Hashimoto of Japan, the Board's membership is still taking shape, but already includes a range of technical experts and eminent men and women with extensive experience in water issues. I have asked them to raise awareness and help mobilize resources for water and sanitation programmes. They will certainly, at their first meeting, look at the links between their work and yours.

As the world attempts to find a more secure and equitable path of development, you have multiple roles to play. This Commission must be a watchdog, alert to threats and fearless in sounding alarms. We look to you for coherent, effective policy. And you must continue to give voice to all stakeholders, not just governments. We must all listen to what science is telling us about our planet, and to what ordinary people — the billions without water or sanitation, or living in slums — are telling us about their lives. We need to overcome the entrenched interests and economic short-sightedness that hinder progress. And we need to act urgently on what has already been agreed. Let us, together, build the critical mass of actors and attitudes that is necessary to change course.

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