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Johannesburg Summit Opens With Calls for Credible Action

Johannesburg, 26 August— South Africa President Thabo Mbeki opened the World Summit on Sustainable Development today with a call for governments to agree on a set of practical measures that will help humanity improve the lives of people everywhere.

“The peoples of the world,” Mbeki said, “expect that this World Summit will live up to its promise of being a fitting culmination to a decade of hope, by adopting a practical programme for the translation of the dream of sustainable development into reality and bringing into being a new global society that is caring and humane.”

For the next nine days, government delegates, NGOs and business leaders will work toward hammering out commitments to spur action on a wide range of issues that will improve peoples lives while protecting the environment. These commitments, it is hoped, will overcome the failure over the last decade to achieve progress on several important fronts— chiefly poverty eradication and reversing environmental degradation.

In one of the first signs of progress, governments, in negotiations, agreed on provisions regarding the Global Environment Facility that reflected the recent decision of 32 countries, developed and developing, to replenish the GEF in the amount of \$2.9 billion over the next four years and to expand the GEF’s mandate by allowing it to serve as the finance mechanism for the Convention to Combat Desertification.

At the start of the Summit, the UN had accredited 12,625 government delegates, NGOs and media representatives to the Summit. They will be joined, next week, by more than 100 world leaders who will adopt a Political Declaration reaffirming their commitment to a path toward sustainable development.

As the Summit began, with participants were fully aware that the task ahead would not be easy, considering the progress so far.

“Sadly, we have not made much progress in realizing the grand vision contained in Agenda 21 and other international agreements,” Mbeki said. “It is no secret that the global community has, as yet, not demonstrated the will to implement the decisions it has freely adopted.”

While there has been some success in implementing sustainable development at the local level, Johannesburg Summit Secretary-General Nitin Desai said, “Overall, the record is poor.” He added, “Rio provided a roadmap, but that has not been good enough. We need a route plan.”

“We must have some sense of urgency,” Desai said. “Three million people die each year due to air pollution. Five million die every year from water borne diseases. We have to start now to address these problems through partnerships and long-term vision.”

United Nations Environment Programme Executive Director Klaus Toepfer called the Summit “an opportunity for us to prove that the reinvigoration of international solidarity and partnership that we all talk of is not merely a pious wish.”

In a major Summit innovation aimed at promoting action, the Summit held the first of six plenary sessions on issues where achievable results are considered possible, such as on water, energy, health, agriculture and biodiversity. Instead of the typical tradition of Summit speechmaking, the plenary sessions feature moderated dialogue among experts, governments and representatives of major groups.

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