

THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

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OPENING REMARKS TO THE PRESS

New York, 11 September 2008

Ladies and gentlemen, glad to see you again, I'm meeting you for the third time this month. I feel personally sorry that I have not been able to meet you as often as I hoped during the summer break. I understand that it has been some months since we had this type of press conference last. I'd like to meet you more regularly, from next month. So I'd like to propose that we meet on the first Tuesday of each month, unless my schedule prevents me. If I have to travel outside of Headquarters, then we'll try to arrange another date. So, I'd like to meet you more regularly from today.

On the eve of the new General Assembly, which is going to be my second General Assembly as Secretary-General, I am very much excited and anxious to make this General Assembly as successful - and even more successful than before. I see this as a new beginning, a fresh start with fresh initiatives.

As you know very well, on September 25th, the President of the General Assembly and I are going to convene the High-Level Event on the Millennium Development Goals. And also, before that, on September 22nd, again, there will be an equally important High-Level Meeting on African development issues, on NEPAD [New Partnership for Africa's Development].

Last year we used these kind of high level meetings to galvanize political will and action on climate change. And I would like to use these two occasions to really work more for the poorest people - the poorest of the poor - the 'bottom billion' trapped in poverty.

Some 150 countries will be represented, including more than 90 Heads of State or Government and other international figures. Nearly twenty of the world's biggest and prominent philanthropic foundations will also be here.

Today we're releasing The Millennium Goals Report 2008 - the most comprehensive global assessment to date. It provides hard evidence on what we have done well, and what more needs to be done if we are to reach our goals by 2015.

Developing countries are devoting more resources to education and health, thanks to reduced external debt servicing, fresh assistance and new financing from private foundations.

Primary school enrolment is rising, and we've been seeing progress on health and gender equality.

The proportion of people living in extreme poverty is expected to decline by half by 2015, according to new data from the World Bank. That, too, is a major accomplishment.

But progress is largely concentrated in Asia. Until recently, sub-Saharan Africa was losing ground in the fight against extreme poverty. Investment in agriculture is critical.

Despite the challenges, there are enough successes to prove that most of the Goals are reachable in all countries.

In most cases, we already know what needs to be done, and how. Now we need an aggressive push to get the world on track.

On MDGs, there have been some questions, even doubts, about whether these MDG goals are achievable ones. I believe that these are achievable goals, as set out and agreed by world leaders in 2000. For that to be possible, we must really galvanize political will and mobilize necessary resources and I count on the leadership of developed countries.

I expect all participants to announce specific initiatives or commitments and lay out plans them. By the close of the meeting, we hope to be in a very different place from where we are today.

I am going to have another press conference at the close of the high level event on September 25th.

I think this is a new era of global partnership, not just by member states, but by a galaxy of emerging players on the international scene. I know that you have more immediate concerns. Let me address a few issues of conflicts.

On Georgia, I remain in almost daily contact with world leaders. I have offered my good offices to facilitate international discussions, and we will explore possible peacekeeping or other arrangements for Abkhazia and South Ossetia. We are also looking at sending a fact-finding mission to Georgia. UN agencies are delivering assistance to all people they can reach.

On Cyprus, I am encouraged by our progress and by our facilitation role on this issue. This week, I have spoken with all the key players, including the Turkish Cypriot leader, Mr. Mehmet Ali Talat, and the Greek Cypriot leader, Mr. Dimitris Christofias, as well as the prime minister of Greece, Mr. Kostas Karamanlis, and the Turkish Prime Minister, Mr. Recep Erdogan.

The first substantive negotiations began this morning, attended by my Special Advisor, Mr. Alexander Downer. He describes the meeting as “productive” and “fruitful.” During my telephone calls to all the leaders, I have urged them to seize the momentum and try to demonstrate their political leadership with a sense of flexibility and wisdom, also looking beyond their visions and issues; they should look to the future of the Cypriot people.

While I believe that the Cypriot people have the ownership of this, we are committed to continue to provide our facilitating role.

On Lebanon, I am encouraged by President [Michel] Suleiman's efforts toward establishing an inclusive national dialogue, also including diplomatic relations between Lebanon and Syria. At the same time, I condemn yesterday's car bombing and urge restraint. This is a very frustrating situation, that we see many such bombings and killings. This violence only underscores how important it is for dialogue and reconciliation to move forward.

The UN Deputy Secretary-General, Dr. [Asha-Rose] Migiros, arrived in Lebanon today. Her visit will focus chiefly on economic development, but she will have meetings with President Suleiman, Prime Minister [Fouad] Siniora and Speaker [Nabih] Berri.

We have strongly supported the Annapolis process with its ambitious goal of a comprehensive peace by the end of 2008 – a peace that will encompass the reality of two states, Palestine and Israel, living in peace and security.

The meetings I will host on the margins of the General Assembly offer an opportunity to assess the situation and chart a way ahead. There will be meetings of the Quartet and the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee as well as an iftar for Arab Leaders.

I share the frustration many feel with the situation in Myanmar. We have not seen the political progress I had hoped for. We want to see the parties, in particular the Government of Myanmar, take tangible steps toward establishing a credible and inclusive political process in the country, which of course must include progress on human rights.

Somalia cannot be abandoned. Since coming into office I have insisted on a stronger response. The recent Djibouti agreement reached under the auspices of my Special Representative is encouraging. But to consolidate this process we need to deploy an international force. And Member States must strengthen the current AU force on the ground.

In the broader Horn of Africa, more than fourteen million people urgently need help. In Ethiopia alone, the population needing food aid could double to eight million by the end of this year.

Hurricanes have been devastating the Caribbean. In the last month, Haiti has been hit especially hard. There is also severe flooding in South Asia.

Climate shocks are affecting people everywhere. We have to find ways to revitalize this debate. Our first test comes three months from now in Poznan, Poland. By then we need a shared vision of what a global climate change agreement will look like. We have only eighteen months until Copenhagen. The clock is ticking. In that regard, I would like to again urge upon the leaders of the Polish Government, the Danish Government and all other Member States of the United Nations to demonstrate their political leadership.

Our theme for last year's General Assembly was building a stronger UN for a better world. This is an ongoing effort. You may have read my remarks to our senior advisers in Torino during our senior retreat. Some press reports misconstrued what I said, suggesting that I viewed our first year as a failure.

To the contrary, I think we've made good progress in many areas, particularly when it comes to management reform. Please remember that the purpose of the retreat in Torino was that we really wanted to improve the areas where we have not made progress rather than focusing on the areas where we have made some progress. Therefore, my remarks to our senior advisers have been mainly focused on what we need to do more.

But my essential point is that we need change. The world is changing around us, and the UN must also change with it. We are responsible to the global taxpayers – and to the UN's thousands of hard-working and dedicated staff members – to create an Organization that is more effective and more modern. That is better able to deal with the world's problems.

This year – and in coming years – I will devote strenuous effort to changing and reforming how this Organization does business.

Lastly, today we are observing again the tragic anniversary of 11 September terrorist attacks. This week, as you have already participated, the UN held an unprecedented symposium in support of the victims of terrorism and we had also a review session of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy. On this solemn occasion, we stand with the families and the loved ones they lost. And you have our firm commitment to fight against terrorism.

Thank you. I will now take your questions.