

Opening Statement

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at the Regional Meeting of African LDCs for the Midterm Comprehensive Global Review of the Implementation of the Programme of Action for the Least Developed Countries for the Decade 2001 – 2010

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Excellencies, Distinguished Participants, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to address the African regional preparatory meeting on the mid-term global review of the implementation of the Programme of Action for the LDCs for the decade 2001-2010, jointly organized by the Economic Commission for Africa and the Office of the High Representative for Least Developed Countries, the Landlocked Developing Countries and the Small Island Developing States (OHRLLS).

At the outset, let me express my warm appreciation to Mr. Abdoulie Janneh, Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Africa, for his kind invitation and gracious arrangements for my delegation's participation in this important meeting in Addis Ababa.

Excellencies, Distinguished Participants, Ladies and Gentlemen,

As you may be aware, just five months ago in September 2005, world leaders adopted the 2005 World Summit Outcome document. Through that landmark document, they not only reiterated their commitment to achieving the timely and full realization of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by 2015, but they also strongly reaffirmed their commitment to addressing the special needs of LDCs, particularly through the implementation of the Brussels Programme of Action for LDCs for the Decade 2001-2010.

Both the MDGs and the Brussels Programme of Action for LDCs are intertwined. Indeed, most of the MDG targets, such as poverty reduction, improved health of children and mothers, basic education and safe drinking water, are also embedded in the Brussels Programme of Action. If the world community is to achieve the MDGs by 2015, it is imperative that it promotes the expeditious implementation of the Brussels Programme of Action in both letter and spirit.

In this context, the conduct of the mid-point review of the Brussels Programme of Action at this juncture is most timely. I am confident that this mid-term review in Africa, and the one in our own region, Asia and the Pacific, along with the ministerial review planned to be held in Benin in June this year, will together constitute a significant contribution to the world community's efforts to take stock of achievements, identify gaps and suggest region-friendly and concrete action plans for meaningful implementation of the Brussels Programme in the remaining five years.

Solid preparations at the country and regional levels will determine the success of the comprehensive global-level review. I understand that most of the LDCs have prepared their country-level assessment reports.

It will now be an immense challenge for the regional commissions and other partners to take this a step further and produce regional assessment reports with practical strategies for implementing the Brussels Programme of Action.

Africa is home to 34 of the world's 50 LDCs. I congratulate the Economic Commission for Africa, and my colleague Mr. Abdoulie Janneh and his able staff, for organizing this preparatory meeting for African LDCs. I am confident that the outcome document adopted in Addis Ababa will be a critical contribution to the mid-term comprehensive global review of the implementation of the Programme of Action for the LDCs for the decade 2001-2010.

Excellencies, Distinguished Participants, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Asian and Pacific region is home to 14 of the 50 LDCs in the world. Like the Economic Commission for Africa, we too are also steeped in preparations toward the regional mid-term review of the Brussels Programme of Action for the LDCs for the decade 2001-2010. Allow me to share with you some information on our preparations for the regional mid-term review.

The Asian and Pacific regional review meeting is being jointly organized by UNESCAP and OHRLLS. It is generously supported by UNDP.

The review meeting will be held in Bangkok from 14 through 15 March 2006. We have invited all UNESCAP member countries, including 14 LDCs, UN bodies and other international organizations to join the mid-term review. Furthermore, I am pleased to inform you that the Honorable Prime Minister of the Lao People's Democratic Republic, an Asian LDC, will honour our meeting with his participation.

As here, we shall also have a full agenda in our two-day meeting. The Asia-Pacific regional outcome document to be adopted in Bangkok will focus not only on the assessment of progress towards attainment of the MDGs through the implementation of the Brussels Programme of Action, but it will also discuss the implementation of regional support measures in areas directly pertinent to Asian and Pacific LDCs. These areas include:

- (a) Financing for development;
- (b) Trade, migration and technology transfer;
- (c) Environment;
- (d) Security issues.

Our review meeting will also discuss national, regional and international measures for the attainment of the internationally agreed development goals.

Recognizing that a two-day regional meeting in Bangkok could be too short for our LDC member states to have in-depth discussion on all aspects of the proposed regional outcome document to be adopted in Bangkok, we, therefore, organized a three-day technical preparatory expert group meeting last week in Phnom Penh. I am pleased to inform you that 13 out of 14 Asia-Pacific LDC focal points and several experts joined in that meeting, which was highly successful in generating a draft regional outcome document for consideration and adoption in Bangkok next month.

Excellencies, Distinguished Participants, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The next three days will provide us with valuable opportunity to learn much about African LDCs. Permit me to share with you some key perspectives concerning Asian and Pacific LDCs, especially in terms of the socio-economic challenges that they face and the opportunities before them.

As you might be aware, Asia and the Pacific is a large, dynamic and highly diverse region. It has some of the most populous countries and rapidly growing economies in the world. Clustered in South Asia, South-East Asia and the Pacific, the 14 LDCs in the region find themselves at a crossroads. They are surrounded by some of the most advanced and most vibrant nations of the twenty-first century.

Yet, they have singularly failed to benefit fully from the region's high growth performance, as well as the regional flows of trade and investment. Lacklustre economic growth has prevented them from making any serious dent in reducing income poverty, particularly in the continental LDCs.

Only Cambodia and the Lao People's Democratic Republic are expected to halve by 2015 the proportion of people living below their national poverty lines. Except for some Pacific LDCs, none of them enjoys a per capita income in excess of US \$500. This is a grim reminder of the very low standard of living and the poor quality of life in many of the LDCs in a region that is reputed for the upbeat and fast pace of its economic progress.

The incidence of hunger is unacceptably high. Child malnutrition is widespread. Even if the targets for malnutrition are reached, more than 10 million children in the LDCs will remain underweight in 2015. Although primary school enrolment rose from 71 per cent to 79 per cent in the 1990s, it is significantly lower than the regional average of 93 per cent. Thus, the vast majority of the children in our LDCs are growing up with their true potential -physical, intellectual, and psychological-never fully realized.

The absolute levels of child mortality and maternal mortality are also unacceptably high in the LDCs of our region. Many of them are engaged in battling a variety of communicable diseases such as HIV/ AIDS, malaria, and tuberculosis. At the same time, a new silent killer is emerging in the form of chronic diseases such as cancers, heart disease, and diabetes.

Widespread poverty has also placed great strain on environmental resources. It is feared that, if current trends persist, around 40 million people in the LDCs will be without sustainable access to safe drinking water by 2015. Another 60 million people will be without access to improved sanitation.

Distinguished Participants, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Although the performance of Asia and the Pacific LDCs in the external sector is improving, it still has a long way to go. Their share of regional trade remains insignificant. While it is widely acknowledged that the removal of trade restrictions and the facilitation of exports have the potential of boosting income and reducing poverty, the destination and composition of LDC exports need special attention.

Both require diversification. In this context, the overdependence of the LDCs on selected developed country markets could be reduced through increased participation in intra-regional trade and South-South cooperation.

Similarly, concerted attention needs to be paid to move along the value-addition chain and to link up with regional and sub-regional production hubs. In this regard, labour-intensive production processes need to be upgraded through progressive improvements in labour productivity and technological upgrading by encouraging more foreign direct investment. Use of the full potential of information and communication technologies (ICTs) also needs careful consideration.

Given their unique challenges, it is important to consider how the instruments of tariff and quota-free access for their exports, cancellation of official bilateral debt, and more generous aid to countries committed to poverty reduction, as called for in the Brussels Programme of Action and the Millennium Declaration, could be used to assist LDCs in the Asian and Pacific region.

Here too, the LDCs have to pay particular attention to institutional capacity building so that their economies acquire the needed flexibility to take full advantage of market access opportunities, as well as make greater use of official development assistance.

It is anticipated that whatever ODA is offered to the LDCs in the Asian and Pacific region in the coming years, the bulk of it will be directed to the establishment of physical infrastructure and meeting the internationally agreed goals, including the MDGs. In coping with this changed emphasis, the LDCs in the Asian and Pacific region would have to invest in and improve institutional capacity along a wide range of development activities, including governance and public participation.

Another important aspect of Asian and Pacific LDCs is that many government budgets are often in deficit. This is largely because they rely heavily on trade-related taxes, revenue from state-owned enterprises and official development assistance. Therefore, the creation of a more diversified revenue base for supporting public investments in critical areas requires urgent attention.

Furthermore, several LDCs in our region are also post-conflict societies whose defence expenditure and reconstruction costs impose a heavy burden on national exchequers. Here too, innovative approaches would be needed to build peace and embark on the path towards sustainable human development.

Excellencies, Distinguished Participants, Ladies and Gentlemen,

You may have noticed that Asian and Pacific LDCs face some unique socio-economic challenges. At the same time, there are also challenges that resemble those faced by African LDCs.

Thus, all Asian and Pacific and African LDCs, including Haiti and Yemen, should demonstrate strong solidarity to urge the world community once again to lend more support to the swift implementation of the Brussels Programme of Action. Such explicit solidarity would be central to efforts to ensure that all people living in LDCs may also have the opportunity to improve their living conditions and have a decent standard of living, as is their development right.

I wish you all the very best for successful deliberations.

Thank you.