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Statement by
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Agenda Item 3: Follow-up actions to the recommendations of the International Conference on Population and Development

Mr. Chairman, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen:

On behalf of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), I would like to thank you for giving me the opportunity to briefly describe our activities in follow-up to the recommendations of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), focusing on population distribution, urbanization and internal migration and their implications for development.

Urbanization is a largely inevitable and irreversible demographic process that requires good management to yield optimal outcomes. As the region of Asia and the Pacific becomes prosperous, rising urbanization and uneven distribution of population have posed enormous challenges to many countries in the region. Today, the majority or sixty percent of the population in Asia still live in rural areas. However, the urban population of the region is expected to increase markedly in coming decades, from 1.6 billion in 2007 to 3.4 billion in 2050, more than doubling its size. Coupled with the predicted declines in rural population after 2025, two-thirds of the region's population will be urban dwellers by 2050.

Urban population is not only growing, but also distributed unevenly among countries. Three out of top five countries with large urban population are in the Asia-Pacific region. Hence, according to the latest statistics available, the urban population of China, India and Indonesia taken together accounts for approximately 30 per cent of the urban population in the world.

The absence of effective city planning and governance has led to the emergence of many megacities or the cities with over ten million inhabitants. Many countries in the region attempted to control rural to urban migration, or redirect migration flows with little or no effect. As a result, the region has 11 out of 19 megacities in the world. With 36 million people, Tokyo is the world's largest megacity and it is not expected to change the size until 2050. Cities such as Lahore and Karachi in Pakistan and Dhaka in Bangladesh are also fast growing.

Distinguished Delegates,

It is important to recognize that there are significant differences in nature between rural poverty and urban poverty. A lack of arable land and non-firm employment, unavailability of services within a reasonable distance, and a lack of political will to improve access to services are common in rural areas, forming barriers to alleviate poverty. By contrast, urban poverty has a feature of working poor. Despite having an income, urban-specific costs, such as highly monetized access to goods and services and high health cost of living in an unhealthy environments deprive the well-being of people in urban areas.

In the Asia-Pacific region, poverty still remains concentrated in rural areas. Of 641 million people in the region living on less than one dollar a day, 65 to 80 per cent of them are rural dwellers. Although the region saw a dramatic drop of poverty in recent years, especially in Eastern Asia, still only 34 per cent of people in rural areas have an access to improved sanitation. Due to lack of public health services, there remain many countries with high level of child mortality in rural areas, especially in South Asia.

Being the main site of economic growth, urban areas generally have potential for reducing poverty. However, in Asia and the Pacific, employment in informal sector has been prevalent, concomitant with poverty. Besides the low wages, informal workers have no legal security and are more prone to abuse by their employers. Furthermore, limited access to income and employment opportunities often forces people to live in areas that are not suitable for habitation, where environmental conditions threaten their health. The latest statistics show that in the Asia-Pacific region over 400 million or 35 per cent of urban population are living in slums.

Distinguished Delegates,

The issues of urbanization and population distribution, as well as their far-reaching socio-economic implications, are close to the heart of the UNESCAP. We undertake several projects and programmes to address those critical issues at the regional level. Allow me to highlight some important ones.

This year, UNESCAP plans to launch the first "State of Asian Cities Report (SACR)" at the fourth session of the UN-HABITAT World Urban Forum (WUF-4) to be

held in Nanjing, China, in November 2008. The report will take stock of the state of cities in Asia, regarding their productivity, inclusiveness, sustainability and governance, by understanding their specific national economic and demographic contexts, and analyzing their unique development issues in the local context. It is expected that the report will help practitioners and policymakers to deepen the knowledge on sustainable urban development for future work, and contribute to the advocacy of the importance of sustainable urban development, especially for the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

Also this year, UNESCAP will undertake, jointly with UN-HABITAT, the project named "Urban Safety for the Poor in Asia and the Pacific". The project aims to enhance the capacity of urban local governments in the Asia-Pacific region to implement urban safety practices to achieve improvements in the lives of the poor, who are impacted by urban insecurity and the fear of insecurity. Involving three pilot cities in the region, the project will work towards sensitizing local governments on their roles in improving urban safety, by gathering and making the successful practices available.

Distinguished Delegates,

Rapid urbanization and urban agglomeration of population are the demographic phenomenon which the Asia-Pacific region never experienced in its long history. Unprecedented scale of urban growths will shape economic, social and environmental future, posing challenges to many countries in the region. ESCAP pays closer attention to the issue, and is ready to work closely with the Governments in the region, especially through regional research and the facilitation of exchanges in policy information and experiences among countries in the region.

Thank you very much for your kind attention.