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*World population monitoring, focusing on
international migration and development*

Report of the Secretary-General

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Mr. Chairman, thank you for the occasion to introduce this report.

Our latest calculations show that the number of international migrants has increased by 36 million over the past 15 years to reach 191 million by 2005. Concluding that migration is spiraling out of control would be unjustified, however. Between 1990 and 2005, the global migrant population increased by 23 per cent, about the same as the world population as a whole. Only 3 out of every 100 persons on earth is an international migrant, a figure that has not changed over the past 15 years. In fact, the growth of the migrant population has slowed down. The increase in the global number of migrants between 1990 and 2005 was 5 million lower than between 1975 and 1990.

It is true that all countries in the world are impacted by international migration as countries of origin, destination, or both. But, more importantly, there is a huge variation in the migration experience of regions and countries. At least five key factors are shaping those different experiences.

First, the majority of international migrants are located in only a few countries. In 2005, three-quarters of all migrants were hosted by the 28 largest receiving countries. International migrants constitute less than 10 per cent of the total population in two-thirds of all countries.

Second, a growing share of the world's migrants is hosted by the more developed regions. Between 1990 and 2005, the migrant population in the more developed countries increased by 33 million, while the increase in the less developed countries was just 3 million. Today, the more developed countries are hosting 60 per cent of the world's migrants. In fact, 1 out of every 3 migrants lives in Europe and about 1 out of every 4 lives in Northern America.

Third, many countries have actually experienced a reduction in the number of migrants. Since 1990, 72 countries registered an absolute decline in their migrant populations. This reduction can be attributed in large part to the successful repatriation of some 21 million refugees, particularly to developing countries.

Fourth, available data suggest that the proportion of migrants from developing countries in developed countries has risen rapidly since 1990. In Canada and the United States, more than 80 per cent of all recent immigrants originate in developing countries. In Europe, the indicators show a sharp rise in migration from developing countries as well.

Fifth, the proportion of women and girls in global migration is high and increasing. At the world level, 49 per cent of international migrants were female in 1990 and that proportion has risen to almost 50 per cent in 2005. In the more developed countries, female migrants outnumber male migrants.

Mr. Chairman, not only do we witness important shifts in global migration patterns, we also see changes in the reasons that prompt people to migrate.

Reflecting the resolution of some long-standing conflicts, fewer people have been forced to cross international borders, and, as noted earlier, millions of refugees have been able to return home. The global refugee population dropped from 20 million in 1990 to less than 14 million in 2005. More recently, the number of asylum requests submitted in the more developed countries dropped by almost half, from over 600,000 in 2001 to close to 300,000 in 2005.

Although asylum has dominated much of the migration debate in recent years, particularly in Europe, family reunification continues to be the cornerstone of immigrant admissions, often accounting for more than half of the total intake. In recent years, however, a number of countries have imposed stricter rules for family reunification leading to a reduction in the family migration stream.

In parallel with the decline in admissions on the basis of humanitarian and family considerations, there has been a steady rise in labour migration, both of highly-skilled as well as of low-skilled workers. In recent years, a growing number of receiving countries have introduced temporary employment programmes. More generally, government views towards international migration have shifted markedly in recent years. In 2005, only 22 per cent of all countries wanted to lower immigration, down from 40 per cent in 1996. The trend away from a blanket reduction of immigration towards selective labour migration is particularly strong among developed countries.

Turning to the demographic impact of international migration, the report highlights some important differences in regional experiences. Europe's population, for instance, would have been declining since 1995 had it not been for migration. Similarly, international migration is making an important contribution to population growth in Northern America and Oceania. In contrast, population growth in many developing countries is hardly affected by migration. An exception is some small countries and island States where migration has reduced population growth by over 50 per cent. With fertility rates declining in many developing countries, it is projected that the role of migration in shaping future population growth will become more important.

In the developing regions, where circular and return migration patterns are more common, migration levels are more difficult to establish with accuracy due to a lack of timely statistics. Moreover, the population census, the main source of information in these countries, does not capture everyone who has migrated. In particular, persons who have migrated but who have returned to their country of birth may not be counted. For instance, the large numbers of refugees who have returned to their home countries in recent years are not included in our estimates of the migrant population.

Regarding key destination countries in the less developed regions, one of the largest concentrations of migrants is found in the oil-producing countries in the Middle East. By 2005, these countries hosted almost 13 million migrants, most of whom are temporary workers.

The number of international migrants in Eastern and South-eastern Asia, a more recent region of destination, has risen sharply, to over 3 million by 2001. In Africa, important poles attracting migrants are South Africa, countries producing oil, as well as countries in Western Africa. In Latin America and the Caribbean, the dominant trend continues to be emigration to Northern America.

Mr. Chairman, let me now turn to the migration development nexus. Undoubtedly, remittances are one the clearest expressions of the impact of migration on development. In 2004, migrants remitted 226 billion US dollars through formal channels, 64 per cent of which was received by developing countries. Remittances benefit the low- and middle-income families that receive them and enable migrant households to invest in income-generating activities. Through migrant associations in countries receiving remittances, funds may be pooled to support development projects in the communities of origin. In short, remittances can have an important impact on poverty reduction in low-income countries.

For migrant receiving countries, the net economic impact of international migration is generally positive. Although the presence of international migrants may have a small adverse effect on the wages of non-migrants or may raise unemployment when wages are rigid, such effects are small at the national level. Over the medium and long term, migration can generate employment and produce net fiscal gains. Studies in rapidly ageing populations indicate that international migrants can contribute substantially to relieving the fiscal burden on future generations.

Yet, international migration can also have less positive outcomes. One is the loss of skilled personnel through emigration. Particularly in smaller developing countries, the delivery of essential public services is at risk due to the emigration of skilled workers.

The integration prospects of long-term migrants are a key issue in many countries. The number of countries which reported having programmes to facilitate integration increased from 52 in 1996 to 75 in 2005. Poor academic performance and high unemployment among migrants and their descendants rank among the main concerns.

Although its extent is difficult to estimate, Governments have recently increased their efforts to prevent irregular migration. Policies to combat irregular migration include tightening border controls, returning migrants with irregular status, limiting access to social services and regularization programmes.

By some estimates, half of all migrants who enter countries clandestinely do so through smuggling and trafficking. Six years after the adoption of the Protocols on Smuggling of Migrants and Trafficking in Persons, they have been ratified by 97 and 88 countries respectively, indicating the high priority that many countries accord to preventing and combating these crimes.

Protecting the human rights of migrants is of central concern. The 1990 International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, which entered into force in 2003, has been ratified by 34 countries. However, none is a major migrant receiving country.

To harness positive migration outcomes and to mitigate its negative impact, countries have concluded many bilateral agreements in recent years. The aims of these agreements range from regulating the flow of migrant workers and facilitating the transfer of remittances, to readmitting migrants in an irregular situation. In addition, initiatives at the regional and international levels to regulate migration have multiplied.

In closing, Mr. Chairman, allow me to conclude that international migration is fostering a growing interdependence between more developed and less developed countries. And hence, there is need to explore common interests and policies that work. Unfortunately, the lack of reliable data severely limits the effective monitoring and evaluation of migration policies.

Nevertheless, I hope that this report will prove useful, not only during this Commission, but also in preparing for the High-level Dialogue. In this context, I am pleased to inform you that the 2005 revision of the international migrant database, an important source of information for this report, is available in digital form on our website unmigration.org. Other useful documents, such as a compendium of international migration outcomes of major United Nations summits and conferences, can be found in the back of the room.

Thank you.