



Facing Major Challenges, Island Nations Seek Stronger Support from the World Community

(New York, April 2004) – Small island nations will soon have a rare opportunity to present their case to the international community, to seek partnerships and innovative ways to help them address their most vital challenges.

Island nations – from the Caribbean, Mediterranean and South China Seas, and the Pacific, Atlantic and Indian Ocean regions – will join with donor and other countries in Mauritius, from 30 August to 3 September this year, at the United Nations International Meeting to Review the Implementation of the Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States.

For the forty-plus small island nations, the Mauritius meeting has big stakes, as they tackle serious threats and seek ways to boost and support their efforts to achieve sustainable development and to improve their inhabitants' lives. Some of the challenges they face include that:

- climate change's adverse impacts are already striking islands;
- fragile ecosystems require urgent protection;
- islands need more market access and better terms of trade;
- renewable energy is vital to lessen dependency;
- tourism has to be made more sustainable;
- information technology can reduce isolation;
- island cultures remain an untapped asset;
- diseases like HIV/AIDS and malaria must be fought;
- security challenges are a burden; and
- island vulnerabilities have to be overcome.

The Mauritius International Meeting will examine progress in implementing the Programme of Action approved at the Global Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States, held in Barbados in 1994. In addition to climate change and tourism, the Programme includes the following priority areas: natural disasters, wastes, marine resources, freshwater, land resources, energy, biodiversity, transport and science/technology. Small island and donor nations had agreed to tackle islands' challenges in partnership.

Since then, the Barbados Programme of Action has been only partially implemented, partly due to a reduction in foreign aid. Overall disbursements to small islands totalled \$2,335 million in 1994. That figure fell to \$2,158 million in 1996 and to \$1,700 million in 2001. At the same time, small islands did not attract the levels of foreign private capital and foreign direct investments that they had anticipated, mainly because they lack the market size, skilled labour and indigenous technological development to compete with larger developing countries for such investment flows.

In a recent report on small islands, United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan notes that there is “considerable evidence” of the efforts made by small island developing States to implement the Barbados Programme of Action. The report acknowledges that “perceptible progress has been achieved” by small island nations within the constraints of limited financial resources and weak institutional, human and technological capacity.

Small island developing States (SIDS), the Secretary-General says, experience specific challenges and vulnerabilities arising from the interplay of such factors as small populations and economies, weak institutional capacity in both the public and the private sector, remoteness from international markets, susceptibility to natural disasters and climate change, fragility of land and marine ecosystems, high costs of transportation, limited diversification in production and exports, dependence on international markets, and vulnerability to external economic shocks. “As a result, their economies, including trade, financial flows and agricultural production, show greater volatility than those of other countries,” Mr. Annan adds.

At the United Nations Millennium Summit in 2000, 147 Heads of State and Government resolved to address the special needs of small island developing States “rapidly and in full” by 2015, as part of their overall development goals. The World Summit on Sustainable Development, held in 2002 in Johannesburg, confirmed that small islands are a special case that needs support, and several partnerships resulted from the Summit to address their needs.

Earlier this year, while meeting in the Bahamas, ministers from small islands reasserted the validity of the Barbados Programme of Action “as the fundamental framework for the sustainable development of Small Island Developing States” and reiterated their commitment to the targets and timetables in the Millennium Development Goals, and to the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation.

While the changing external and internal circumstances since 1994 have been further exacerbating the challenges they face, small islands have suggested that Governments at the Mauritius International Meeting should also examine emerging issues, such as culture, trade, HIV/AIDS, information technology and new security concerns.

The Secretary-General of the Mauritius International Meeting, Anwarul Chowdhury, is calling on donor countries to provide more support. “In order to meet the priority needs that SIDS identify, I urge development partners to enhance official development assistance directed towards these countries,” he stated. He also encouraged donors and the international financial institutions to increase flows of concessional financing through regional and other multilateral financial institutions to promote economic growth and human development.

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