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UN OFFICIAL CALLS FOR ACTION TO REINFORCE PROGRESS IN POOREST NATIONS

NEW YORK, 16 June (UN Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries -- There is both opportunity and urgency to address the needs of the least developed countries, the United Nations High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Anwarul Chowdhury, said today.

The international community has been taking incremental steps forward on issues relating to least developed countries (LDCs), and a good number of these socially and economically vulnerable countries have been making progress on reforms and economic growth, he said in an interview in advance of a major United Nations economic conference opening 13 June in São Paulo, Brazil.

New United Nations statistics released this month show that 21 out of 50 LDCs achieved growth rates of 5 per cent or better in 2002-2003. Ambassador Chowdhury linked the progress made with reforms in the LDCs, as well as with improved donor assistance, recently rising commodity prices, and a recovering international economy.

But "we do not know how sustainable the recovery in commodity prices will be, and how long the international economy will stay strong", said Ambassador Chowdhury, who will speak at the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) in São Paulo at a Thursday, 17 June, panel on trade and development strategies for LDCs. "This is the time to get increased aid, fairer trade and more effective debt relief into play, so we can build momentum towards meeting the UN Millennium Development Goals."

Among encouraging developments cited by Ambassador Chowdhury, who represents the interests of LDCs and developing landlocked countries and small island States at the United Nations:

-- Least developed countries are benefiting from an upswing in official development assistance (ODA) from \$52 billion to all developing countries in 2001 to \$68 billion in 2003.

-- Recent statements by the European Union and the United States have revived hopes for the successful resumption of the international round of trade talks, and in particular for slashing the rich country agricultural subsidies which take a deadly toll on agriculture-dependent poor countries. In this regard, the World Trade Organization (WTO) recently ruled in favour of a complaint that included four least developed African nations, whose market for cotton exports is largely blocked by subsidies.

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-- Accession of 10 new member States to the European Union effectively means that their population of 75 million is added to the market that least developed countries can export to without trade barriers, under the provisions of the "Everything but Arms" initiative.

-- Because even \$68 billion in ODA is below the figure of \$100 billion generally cited as needed to win the war against global poverty, there will be a high-level discussion on finding innovative new sources of development funding at next week's UN development conference in Brazil.

-- New proposals on increasing development assistance and invigorating debt relief for highly indebted least developed countries, particularly those in Africa, received attention at the 9 June meeting of the Group of 8 in the United States.

Ambassador Chowdhury said that "the world has a moral responsibility to ensure that the population in the 50 LDCs is not left to suffer, while the world is going through the process of globalization. The international community should keep the pledges made at the UN Millennium Summit in 2000".

For more information, contact Tim Wall of the UN Department of Public Information, tel: 1-212-963-5851, e-mail: wallt@un.org. In Brazil, 13-17 June, contact Valéria Schilling from the UN Information Centre, at tel: 21-9788-0169.

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