

“A Sustainable Commitment to Sustainable Cities”

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It is a special honor for me to be part of this second Mayors’ Asia-Pacific Environmental Summit with so many dedicated Governors and Mayors and other local and international leaders to draw conclusions from the important discussions of the past days.

I join the other participants in this Summit, in expressing my special gratitude for the special privilege to be here under the special hospitality of Mayor Harris and his dedicated team, and for the warm welcome and spirit of the people of the City and County of Honolulu. Mayor Harris, this Summit demonstrates your special commitment not only to ensuring the sustainability of the environment and quality of life of this unique and attractive city, but also to building bridges between the people and nations of Asia, the Pacific, and North America.

Mayors are sometimes criticized by their local constituents—and even by their national governments—when they engage as city-diplomats in international affairs. But the world needs to hear more from Mayors like you, Mayor Harris, who understands the linkages between local interests and the regional communities and economies in which our cities exist.

This is a decisive moment in your deliberations, the all-important moment when a stimulating exchange of ideas must be shaped into political and personal commitment. I commend the organizers of this Summit for making this morning’s call for commitments an unavoidable passageway between yesterday’s dialogues and your return to positions of responsibility at home.

We have many meetings and conferences these days. Holding dialogues with international colleagues can still be stimulating enough to make us feel at times like we are doing something tangible just by talking to each other. This is certainly valuable. But the Governors and Mayors here know just how ephemeral these international discussions can be. You are on the front lines of our messy world, daily managing the local breakthroughs and banalities from which our global issues and trends are made. So you must know that the value of a Summit is the action that it ultimately produces in a city or province, a neighborhood or a shantytown.

I am sure that you also need no reminding that short-term, sporadic and ad hoc action cannot be effective in ensuring a sustainable pathway to the future of your cities. Sustainable urban development requires a sustainable, long-term commitment to the actions and the policies through which our visions of the future become reality. Rhetoric, even when it reflects the best of intentions, will not do the job. Actions begin with commitments, and all commitments entail some risk of controversy, even failure. So I commend you for establishing this clear moment of commitment at this Summit.

Any real commitment also is a personal thing. But it is also an act of leadership. The courage to mobilize the will and the capacities of our communities and bridge the divisions within them which make it possible for the commitment to be fulfilled. The commitment of leaders is indispensable; but it is the support of the people who join in the commitment and take the sustained actions required to carry it out to ensure its fulfillment. One of the things that impress me most about the experience of communities in committing themselves to their local Agenda 21 is that it has provided the impetuous and the basic framework for this process.

But at the end of the day, the public life of every commitment reflects a personal story, and says a great deal about the character of its often-personal origins.

When leaders make commitments to sustainable development, it is worthwhile to reflect upon one's personal connections and motivations to these issues. The older I get the more I realize how the course of my life and my interest in the environment and development fields is rooted in my childhood experiences growing up during the great depression in a small town on the Canadian prairies. I saw what economic breakdown meant to our lives and the lives of those around us. And I wondered about the justice and the efficacy of a system, which gave rise to such human suffering and why it took the advent of a war to relieve it. Now, in my own lifetime with our mastery of science and technology and the acceleration of the processes we now commonly refer to as globalization which we have produced and interdependent, global economy, we have developed an unprecedented capacity to generate wealth. Now for the first time ever we have the means to ensure that all the worlds people have access to the resources and conditions required to meet at least their basic needs and open up vast new opportunities for a better life. Indeed, this has enabled many to free themselves from the bonds of poverty. Yet overall there are still more poor people in the world than ever and the gap between rich and poor, beneficiaries and victims, of globalization has widened immensely. Something like one billion of our fellow human beings continue to live in conditions of dire and debilitating poverty and at least as many again live on its margins. This is surely an affront to the moral basis of our civilization. It is also an ominous and growing threat to the sustainability of our civilization.

I want to acknowledge how my own early experiences shaped the career decisions that brought me into the development and environment field, helped me to understand the linkages between them and to ponder how society can redress the inequities and imbalances our economic "progress" has produced. These personal experiences greatly influenced my response to the invitation of UN Secretary General U Thant in 1970 to come into the United Nations to assume responsibility for organizing the first global inter-governmental conference on the environment, the UN Conference on the Human Environment. The Conference was held in Stockholm, Sweden, in June 1972. Like this Summit meeting, it presented many world leaders with a stark choice—whether to be satisfied with a dialogue or, through commitments to action, to shape the agenda for ensuing decades. In Stockholm, it was recognized that many of the most acute and festering environmental problems are most likely to occur in urban areas and this gave rise to the decision to hold a special UN Conference on Human Settlements – Habitat – in

Vancouver, Canada in 1976. This resulted in the creation of the United Nations Center for Human Settlements as a companion organization to the United Nations Environmental Programme in Nairobi, Kenya. Then, in 1996, the UN held another conference in Istanbul, Turkey, which focussed renewed attention on the special issues facing urban areas as the primary centers of both the sources and the effects of our impacts on the environment. While, these events demonstrate the importance the United Nations attaches to the problems of urban areas, I think the time has come to make much more explicit and continuing provision for the participation of local government leaders like you in United Nations fora. Your knowledge and experience in respect of issues for which your responsibilities are closest to the people concerned would make such participation invaluable.

At the Stockholm Conference we succeeded in placing the environment issue firmly on the global agenda. It ignited a virtual explosion of activity by governments, international organizations, business and civil society. These post-Stockholm actions certainly indicated a substantial level of commitment by the leaders gathered there. But the state of our environment today also highlights the difficulty of fulfilling these commitments when they are not based on sufficiently broad support and political will lags. I am sure that this Summit is fully aware of the lessons we can learn from the results of both the Stockholm Conference and the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro which followed it about the real difficulty in fulfilling commitments when the political will required to drive their fulfillment is not sufficiently strong, well focused and sustained. That is why I am so pleased to know that the commitments you are making here will be monitored and recorded so that both positive progress and shortcomings will continuously illuminate community awareness and stimulate sustained action.

The Stockholm Conference starkly brought out, but did not resolve, the differences between developing and more industrialized countries. Indeed the issues of finance and the basis for sharing responsibilities and costs continue to be the principal source of differences and controversy between developing and more developed countries. These differences have become central to international negotiations on virtually every environment and sustainable development subject, notably in respect of the climate change and biodiversity conventions.

So despite progress on many fronts, the overall condition of the Earth's environment continued to deteriorate while the forces driving it – population growth and wasteful patterns of production and consumption – persisted. This led to decision by the United Nations General Assembly in 1984 to convene the World Commission on Environment and Development to re-examine the issues in the perspective of the year 2000 and beyond. Chaired by Gro Harlem Brundtland, its report, issued in 1987, called for a transition to sustainable development as the only viable pathway to a secure and promising future for the human community. Inspired by the Brundtland Commission the UN General Assembly in December 1989 decided to hold the UN Conference on Environment and Development. To underscore the importance of this conference, it was decided that it should be held at the summit level and it is now known universally as the “Earth Summit”.

As an event in itself, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development – the Earth Summit – in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 was clearly remarkable, indeed historic. Never before had so many of the world’s political leaders come together in one place, and the fact that they came to consider the urgent question of our planet’s future put these issues under an enormous international spotlight. This was helped by the presence at Rio, both in the conference itself and the accompanying “Global Forum”, of an unprecedented number of people and organizations representing every sector of civil society, and more than double the number of media representatives than had ever covered a world conference. We were especially fortunate on that occasion to have the participation of a new organization, the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives, ICLEI, which for the first time brought Mayors and local government leaders from around the world into these discussions.

The Earth Summit validated the concept of sustainable development as the indispensable means of achieving in the 21st century a civilization that is sustainable in economic and social as well as environmental terms. It also made clear that sustainability could only be achieved through new dimensions of cooperation amongst the peoples of our planet at every level – nations, regions, sectors, and of particular importance, cities and communities. It called for a new basis for relationships between rich and poor.

I have long been convinced that the concept “Think Globally, Act Locally” is much more than a slogan. It reflects the reality that the attitudes, behavior and actions of people where they live are the primary sources of human impacts on both the local and the global environment. And the ultimate effects of these impacts of these effects are experienced by people at the local level. So there is an inextricable and essential linkage between the local and global as part of the complex system of cause and effects to which human actions have their ultimate consequences. I am pleased to say that of all of the sectors that were involved in the Earth Summit, the follow-up efforts of cities and local governments, through Local Agendas 21 and similar programs, has impressed me.

Despite these shortcomings, the agreements reached at the Earth Summit represent the most comprehensive programme ever agreed by governments for the shaping of the human future. The Programme of Action, Agenda 21, that the Conference adopted presents a detailed “blueprint” of the measures required to affect the transition to sustainability. The Conventions on Climate Change and Biodiversity, negotiated during preparations for the Conference and opened for signature at it, provided the basic legal framework for international agreements on two of the most fundamental global environmental issues. In addition, the Conference agreed on initiating a negotiating process, which has since produced a Convention on Desertification, an issue of critical importance to a number of developing countries, particularly, the countries of Sub-Saharan Africa which are amongst the world’s poorest. The fact that these were agreed to by virtually all of the governments of the world gives them a unique degree of political authority. But the watering down that occurred in respect of some key issues in Agenda 21, notably population, energy and patterns of production and consumption, in order to achieve consensus was disappointing. Nevertheless, overall the results were impressive.

Both economic growth and population growth is concentrated in the cities. Almost all the growth in population anticipated during the next three decades will occur in the urban areas of the developing world, most of it in Asia. Of the 23 mega-cities – with populations of more than 10 million – projected for 2015, thirteen will be in Asia. The scale and speed of urban growth in Asia will exceed anything experienced by their counterparts in the more mature, industrialized countries. And, most of the Asian mega-cities face this monumental challenge, without the resources, both financial and institutional, which were available to the cities of the more industrialized world. Already some of the regions major cities – Manila, Bangkok and Djakarta – are facing serious problems and increasing pressures as their metropolitan areas extend beyond the boundaries of their municipal cores and their growth rates exceed their capacity to provide the necessary supporting infrastructure and services.

Urban growth in China has produced serious environmental problems that threaten the future of many Chinese cities and are now seen by leaders of these cities and the country as one of the main challenges they face in managing the dynamic growth of that great country. Already 9 out of the 10 most polluted cities in the world are in China.

Most Asian cities, and indeed urban areas throughout the developing world, face similar challenges. Nevertheless, Asia provides some promising examples, from which much can be learned. Kuala Lumpur although still far from being a mega-city, has managed its rapid growth relatively well primarily, through the availability of publicly owned land, effective urban planning and development institutions and a well-developed transportation system. Singapore, with its very confined territory, has been innovative and pioneering in managing its remarkable growth. In the course of this, it has introduced controls on motor vehicle traffic – one of the principal sources of environmental problems - as well as other measures from which much can be learned, even by societies which do not have the kind of rigorous political and social discipline, which characterize Singapore. And, Tokyo – one of the world’s largest urban areas – has recovered significantly from the environmental problems it suffered so acutely in the

1960s and early 70s to the point where it has now become quite livable for its 30 million people while continuing to work hard to sustain this progress. Most Asian cities, of course, do not have access to the benefits and resources, which result from the strong supporting economies of Singapore and Japan.

Experience in Asia and throughout the world has demonstrated that successful management of urban growth requires comprehensive planning of all the key elements on which the effective functioning of the communities concerned and the quality of life available to their inhabitants depend. These include land use, infrastructure, transport, the relationship between where people live and where they work, sewage, water and energy supplies. Critical to such success is the establishment of the governance, institutional, policy and legal means, which will ensure adherence to and continuity in implementing these plans and managing the process of growth. Of special importance, is the manner in which finances are obtained, deployed and administered. Indeed, availability of finances is one of the principal constraints on effective management and control of growth and one of the greatest sources of tension and conflict.

From my own experience in private sector real estate development, I have become convinced that one of the most important means of financing the massive costs of urban development is the manner in which the substantial increases in the value of land that inevitably accompany development are distributed and administered. In urban areas where most land is publicly owned, the increases in value accrue, at least in principal, to governments or public authorities that are custodians of the public interest, but that does not always mean that they are used judiciously. In those cases where most of the land is held privately, the increase in value goes to those who own the land. Of course, it is right that they receive a reasonable return.

It would also surely be right that a significant portion of the profit, which is created as a result of the growth process itself rather than action by the owners, should go towards meeting the costs of development. This could be done either through expropriation by the public authorities of such lands at fair value or by leveling at tax on the portion of the increase in value attributable to the results of development in the area rather than by the efforts of the owner. It seems to me that this would be eminently fair. Of course, it would not in most cases meet more than a portion of the investment in infrastructure and services required. But, it could make a significant contribution to meeting these costs.

As the 30th anniversary of Stockholm and the 10th anniversary of Rio approach the world community will rightly claim significant progress in understanding and dealing with the state of the Earth's environment on which these conferences focussed. Inevitably, and realistically, however, it will put the spotlight on the long list of deteriorating conditions, shortcomings and unmet commitments, which document the other side of the balance sheet. The initial decisions of the new administration in the United States have certainly cast a pall over the prospects for Johannesburg. The United States is the world's only super-power and also its super polluter – the largest source of the greenhouse emissions which are producing changes in the earth's climate. This is the reason that people and governments around the world reacted with shock and dismay to the announcement by

President George W. Bush to repudiate unilaterally the results of the international negotiations to reduce these emissions under what is referred to as the Kyoto Protocol. Coupled with his decision to exempt U.S. electric power generating plants from emission controls this constitutes a severe blow to the entire process of international cooperation based on the agreements reached at Stockholm and Rio on which the future of people everywhere depend.

Hopefully this is but President Bush's first word on the subject and that he will heed the preponderance of advice of his own scientists and the concerns of the majority of Americans before taking a final position. The entire world community looks to the United States for leadership and for example in dealing with global environmental risks, of which climate change is the prime example, and anxiously awaits the alternatives to Kyoto which President Bush has promised. I cannot believe that the U.S. president intends, or the American people want, their great country to abdicate its leadership on an issue so crucial to the human future. The world's people, including the closest friends of the United States, would see this as a threat to their own environmental security which would inevitably become a source of deepening tension and conflict.

But we cannot accept pessimism as a theme that will dominate this landmark conference. We must use Johannesburg as an opportunity to revitalize the movement towards a sustainable future, giving it new impetus through action and not merely rhetorical commitments by governments, backed up by the concerted and consistent involvement and concern of their people for a secure and sustainable future. This is a tall order. But it is also an opportunity we cannot afford to miss. For if we fail in Johannesburg to produce a decisive new movement towards the achievement of sustainability, the prospects of doing so will suffer a severe, perhaps retrievable, step backwards.

Ours is the wealthiest civilization ever. We are yet to demonstrate that we are the wisest. On a global basis we have the knowledge, the resources, and the capacities to build in this new millennium a civilization and mode of life in which pollution and poverty are eradicated and the best the benefit which knowledge and technology afford made available universally to ensure all inhabitants of the earth access to a better life and a secure, sustainable future. The real issue is why we are not doing it. Why is the movement for a better, more sustainable world stalled, and in danger of slipping back?

At the root of this dilemma is lack of sufficient motivation—motivation to give priority to the policies, attitudes and practices on which a sustainable future depends. Motivation has several elements.

Economic self-interest is certainly one of them – at both the national and the individual levels. The economic motivations of people and corporations are strongly influenced by governments, through the policies, regulations, fiscal incentives and penalties that they put in place. While most of these are designed for purposes not related directly to the environment and sustainable development a recent study by the Earth Council showed that in many cases they have the effect of providing disincentives to environmentally sound and sustainable behavior, imposing billions of dollars of unnecessary costs on

people as tax payers and consumers. One of the most important things that governments could do to foster the transition to sustainability would be to review and re-vamp this system to provide positive incentives sustainability. This, I submit, would be one of the most effective measures to which governments could agree at Johannesburg.

At the deepest level people and societies are motivated by the fundamental moral, ethical and spiritual values in which their beliefs are rooted. One of my greatest disappointments in the result of the Earth Summit was our inability to obtain agreement on an Earth Charter to define a set of basic moral and ethical principles for the conduct of people and nations towards each other and the Earth as the basis for achieving a sustainable way of life on our planet. Governments were simply not ready for it. So following Rio, the Earth Council joined with many other organizations and hundreds and thousands of people around the world to undertake this important piece of unfinished business from Rio. After a long process of consultation with people throughout the world a people's version of the Earth Charter was promulgated at UNESCO headquarters in Paris in May 1999 and a global campaign is now underway to engage millions of people in the process of using this as a basis for examining and guiding their own basic motivations and priorities and challenging their communities, their governments their organizations to do the same. This promises to be a compelling and authoritative voice of the world's people at Johannesburg, which hopefully will inspire the leaders there not merely to endorse it but to use it as a moral guide to the awesome responsibilities they carry for our common future. Endorsed by the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives at its World Congress of Local Governments in 2000, I invite each of you as Mayors to consider the Earth Charter as a code of principles to guide both your own commitments today, as well as the operations of your municipal governments.

I have focussed my remarks to you on the results and lessons of three decades of commitment making in the field of sustainable development. Today you will make your own commitments. As with the story of the Stockholm and Rio conferences, the historical place of this Summit—and the future of your cities and towns for decades to come—will be decided by the personal character of your commitment and the principles and motivations that guide them.

We have always been willing to accord the highest priority to those measures required to ensure our own security. Peace and security in urban areas is becoming one of the most difficult and challenging issues which you as civic leaders confront. Today, the inhabitants of many of the world's cities face greater threats to their own security in their homes and communities than they do in their involvement in wars. In wars today, often the safest place to be is in the military.

In the armed conflicts between States and within States, the range of civilian casualties in recent times has been on the order of 75 percent. Human security – the security of individuals – and civic security – the security of communities – has now moved on to the international agenda. And, it is certainly on your agendas. This is the main priority of the University for Peace, established by international agreement approved by the United Nations General Assembly in 1980 to serve and support the peace and security goals of

the United Nations through education, training and research is giving priority to human and civic security. It is establishing partnerships with universities and institutes throughout the world to cooperate in helping to develop in communities the insights, the skills and the attitudes, which will enable them to ensure the security of their people. As the United Nations has found most recently in Kosovo and East Timor, it is simpler and quicker to win a war militarily than to build sustainable peace and security. The skills required to do this are in short supply and, working with your institutions and local governments, the University for Peace is committed to helping meet this need.

The University for Peace is allied with the Earth Council which was established as a result of the Earth Summit to support community and grassroots action to follow up and implement the results of the Earth Summit. Environmental security is a key issue for this new century. Many of the conflicts and potential for conflicts in the period ahead arise from competition and disputes over water, natural resources and cross-boundary environmental impacts. The Ombudsman Center for Sustainable Development recently established by the Earth Council in cooperation with IUCN and the University for Peace is designed to help anticipate, prevent and, when they occur, ensure peaceful resolution of such conflicts.

I am not a prophet, nor even an expert, but my own experience in international life for over more than 40 years has brought me to sobering conclusion that the future of our civilization, at least as we know it, will be determined during the first three decades of this new millennium. For the level of human population and the scale and intensity of human activities is now impacting on the Earth's environmental and life support systems in ways which affect the basic boundary conditions on which life as we know it depends. We should make no arrogant assumptions on the basis that life has prevailed, despite the dire predictions of doomsayers, for many thousands of years. For the conditions which make life possible have only existed for a minute portion of the Earth's history and we are now affecting these conditions, accelerating and altering the processes of natural change which had previously occurred over tens of millions of years.

We are literally now the agents of our own future. What we do, or fail to do, in this first part of the new millennium will, I am persuaded, be decisive. Make your commitments boldly, but above all make them real in the sense that you will continue in earnest to improvise and innovate to achieve them until they are fulfilled. To quote one of the great urban thinkers of my city of Toronto and of our time, the renowned Jane Jacobs in her book Cities and the Wealth of Nations:

“If one wanted to define development in single word, that word would be improvisation. . . . Apart from the direct practical advantages of improvisation, the practice itself fosters a state of mind essential to all development, no matter what stage development has reached at the time. The practice of improvising, in itself, fosters delight in pulling it off successfully and, most important, faith in the idea that if one improvisation doesn't work out, another likely can be found that will.”

No generation of political leadership has ever faced a more awesome challenge, balancing between formal responsibilities to economic and political systems that are fundamentally flawed and the morally necessary improvisation to change those systems in the interests of our common future. No one is better positioned to take the lead in dealing with it than the people gathered here.

I hope for you that in 30 years' time you and your followers can gather once again to document and celebrate the evolution of a region of sustainable cities—built on the foundation of the sustainability of your commitments today.

The eventuality of this outcome is now very much in your hands.