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Habitat:

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STATEMENT BY KURT WALDHEIM, SECRETARY-GENERAL OF THE UNITED NATIONS,
AT THE OPENING OF HABITAT: UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE ON HUMAN SETTLEMENTS

Your Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, ladies and gentlemen.

At the outset, I wish, once again, to express our warm gratitude to the Government and people of Canada for hosting this important Conference. We are also deeply appreciative of all the assistance we have received from the authorities and citizens of Vancouver. From the beginning, Canada's contributions to the United Nations have gone far beyond its formal obligations, and our presence here today is another proof of the generosity and profound involvement of this nation in the great global tasks confronting the world organization and all humanity.

In recent years, the United Nations has been engaged in an historic endeavour to rebuild the fundamental structure of international relationships and to establish new global strategies to meet global problems. This Conference is a major part of that process. We are also seeking to change and adapt the United Nations Organization itself, so it may be better equipped to deal with the new and changing priorities of mankind. We have witnessed, therefore, a period of unprecedented activity. It has produced a ferment of ideas and proposals, which we are now endeavouring to transfer into the realm of action. At this Conference, as at those which preceded it, we are not only reacting to existing crises, we are seeking to create a design for the future. To achieve this we must evolve new global approaches based upon the principles and the reality of interdependence not only among peoples, but the interdependence of the problems they confront.

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We cannot, and do not, avoid the realities of acute international tensions and of the economic gulf which so dramatically divides humanity. We are aware that we inhabit a world in which governments spend much more on armaments than they do on education or health, and in which more than five hundred million people live in misery, many of them on the verge of starvation. For many hundreds of millions of our fellow-citizens of this planet, their "human environment" is simply a struggle to survive.

The very magnitude of the problems facing us, and the fact that they are beyond resolution by anything less than a concerted global effort, must act as our dominant imperative. This Conference addresses the physical realities of the conditions of mankind, and how they affect the lives of the people -- as individuals. We are talking about people -- where and how they live, about the quality of their lives, and about the future for themselves and for generations yet unborn.

This Conference is not only about the planning of villages, towns and cities, but it represents a synthesis of all the concerns which have been taken up by the world community since the Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm in 1972. We have had two special sessions of the General Assembly as well as United Nations conferences on population, food, industrialization, International Women's Year and trade and development, each forming part of a new concerted strategy to make true reality out of the call for a new international economic and social order.

The issues before you are so many, broad and complex that they cannot be arranged in any clear order of importance. Neither rural settlements -- where the majority of people still live -- nor the towns and cities, are satisfying the needs and aspirations of their inhabitants. Their evolution in this century has been all too often exclusively guided by market demand -- itself affected by great inequalities of income -- rather than by deliberate policies to meet elementary human needs. The evolution of technology may, in not infrequent instances, have compounded this trend. Technology has not been consciously geared towards the satisfaction of basic needs; habitat technology has not been progressing at a pace comparable to that of industrial technology, and costs have remained high. We can see this in development of human settlement patterns in most parts of the world.

Immense changes have occurred in the structure of the social and physical forms which govern human existence since the beginning of this century. Indeed, four out of every five people on earth lived in rural areas, in small villages or single family farms, in a world without airplanes, automobiles, radio, television, telephones or electricity.

The changes that have occurred in the way of live, and which are far from universal, are obviously an improvement over isolation and backwardness. But, at the same time, we are forced to recognize the grim fact that after a century of science and invention and of unparalleled technological progress, the number of people who are ill-fed and ill-housed, and who, in the main, lead a life of poverty, is larger than ever before. The dream of an ever-increasing material progress for all is still far from coming true.

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Nor can we lay this fact only to population growth, and seek solutions based solely on population control. Rather, one of the principal purposes of this Conference is to make us more acutely aware of the need to devise better forms of social organization designed to cope with the explosion in human numbers and mobility.

The symptoms of an increasingly serious situation in human settlements are evident in virtually all countries. There are differences in the kinds of problems and in their severity, but hardly any country has escaped the consequences of the inadequacy of past policies and programmes. The most noxious of these symptoms are only too conspicuous: poverty and unemployment, rural stagnation and the mass exodus from the countryside into the cities, ever-spreading urban slums and squatter settlements, the world-wide and growing shortage of housing, the inability of governments to provide basic services of water and sanitation, the menace of air, water and land pollution, and the crisis in municipal finances in the face of augmenting burdens.

In preparation for this Conference, the United Nations, with the help of other bodies of the Organization, has prepared a global review of human settlement conditions which is a part of your Conference documentation. From this important research, we learn these sobering facts:

- One-third or more of the entire urban population of the developing world lives in slums and squatter settlements.
- A large percentage of the people of the less developed countries have no water within a hundred metres of their homes. This condition is a particular burden on millions of women and children.
- More than one half of all people in developing countries have no electricity in their homes, and after the setting of the sun lack an adequate source of light.

These statistics on the living conditions of more than one billion people dramatically attest to our purpose here today and to the need for an additional dimension of human solidarity.

And if such conditions exist today, what is the outlook for the future? It was made abundantly clear at the World Population Conference in Bucharest that the total number of people on our planet will double in the next thirty years. We cannot, therefore, complacently look to a world where the present structure of human settlements is doubled in kind, with twice the extension of slums and squatter settlements, twice the loss of land from urban sprawl, twice the confusion and frustration of urban congestion and twice the pollution of air and water.

Surely we know, as part of the global understanding that brought us here today, that things cannot go on as before? The patterns of human settlement development that have led to our present crisis must give way to new systems of organization, better kinds of planning, fuller use of local experience and initiative, more harmonious and integrated social patterns, and an enlightened sense of responsibility in resource use.

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If we look at the problem from the angle of the basic needs of people, among which the need for adequate shelter will necessarily rank high, we will discover that there are far more possibilities for improvement than are taken advantage of. It would be wrong to look only or mainly at the modern construction industries; houses are made of stone, wood, bricks, mud — of materials of one kind or another — that are in easy reach in almost every country. And in every country there are people without work, anxious to find a productive use for their hands and energies. There are rudimentary techniques for simple family houses and it has been proven again and again that people will work and save and accept personal sacrifice to build and improve their homes. There are cases of spontaneous initiatives for the transformation of city slums, and of the development of rural settlements where space is available which could be most useful as examples for others to follow. The problems are not technical, perhaps not even political, but social and organizational.

Of course, the construction of houses does not, by itself, create complete and useful communities. In this there are complex issues of land use, services, infrastructure, community planning, industry and employment. In fact, the whole process of urbanization is one of the chief dynamics of development and modernization. So we must realize that human settlements -- including large metropolitan centres -- will continue to grow in number and in size, particularly as the developing countries achieve their development goals. We should also understand that it is not the process of urbanization which is the cause of the many problems in human settlements today, but the way in which that process is allowed to manifest itself. If human settlements are permitted to grow haphazardly, the present severe social, economic and environmental problems will continue. The way to avoid them is for planners and decision-makers to anticipate the effects their decisions will have on human settlements. In doing so, they must not forget that solutions devised for one aspect may well have negative effects for others. It is good, therefore, that the United Nations system should address itself to this group of issues and help people to mutually benefit from their individual experiences.

This Conference will consider a basic Declaration of Principles and a set of recommendations for national action and international co-operation. I would hope that embodied in these principles and recommendations will be the fundamental goal to set a minimum standard for decent housing for all people, and to promote the social changes necessary to achieve this end.

I have followed the preparations for the Habitat Conference over the past two years with special interest. I have been most encouraged by the very high level of participation at the regional preparatory conferences and in the meetings of the Preparatory Committee, and I have been impressed by the international response to the audio-visual programme which gives Habitat its unique character. We are all indebted to the able Secretary-General of the Conference, Mr. Enrique Penalosa, for his energy and his imaginative approach to his task.

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This rapidly growing involvement is the result of the recognition by governments that the problems of human settlement throughout the world are crucial, and demand urgent remedial action at national and international levels. The main impetus for change must come at the national level. Governments must accept the challenge laid down by the conditions that exist today and by the awesome demands of the future. They must assess their needs, and bring about the mobilization of human and physical resources to meet them. After this Conference, each government must decide the priority it will give to its human settlement problems and the urgency with which it will undertake the search for solutions.

The world community has the responsibility to help in these efforts, and a part of your work here will be to consider the ways and means by which this can be achieved. But each government must recognize that international assistance can only serve to supplement national action. If a significant role is expected to be played by the United Nations machinery, then the appropriate resources to fulfill this objective must be provided. I have no doubt that the Conference, in discussing the policy options before it, will bear in mind the need for the institutional arrangements to be fully compatible with the underlying objectives for which they are designed -- in this particular case the purposes of multilateral co-operation which Governments will set themselves to accomplish at this Conference. Once the Conference has formulated its recommendations in this regard, I shall indicate the technical and administrative implications to enable the General Assembly to give them practical effect.

Your Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, I am sure that I share with you the hope and expectation that this Conference will succeed in creating a new initiative for change and improvement in the quality of life for all people, and especially for the half of mankind in most desperate need. Habitat can and should carry a message of hope. It can be a milestone in the creation of a more humane world system, a system mindful of our dependence on nature, of our interdependence upon each other, and of our trusteeship of the future.

That is your mandate. I wish you all success in your important task.

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