At the start of the new decade, it is useful to recall how the United Nations and the international community began the first decade of the century – in fact, the beginning of the new millennium.

A September summit at UN Headquarters with unprecedented attendance by world leaders produced a remarkable document, the year-2000 “United Nations Millennium Declaration.” This General Assembly resolution brought together on a few pages the principles and aspirations that the world intended to live up to for a more peaceful, prosperous and just future. Goals and targets were set for peace and disarmament, poverty eradication, environmental protection, human rights, and support for the most vulnerable.

Ten years later, having absorbed and responded to the unanticipated shocks of the past decade – large-scale terrorist attacks, the crippling 2008-2009 recession, sudden escalation in food prices from historical lows, incremental changes in temperature and climate that are gathering ever-stronger momentum – the international community has a chance to assess where it stands in relation to the seminal Millennium Declaration benchmarks, and focus on what needs to be done.

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon outlined seven strategic priorities for the year in his “Agenda 2010” address to the General Assembly on 11 January – delivered from the new, temporary quarters erected for the duration of the renovation of the UN Headquarters complex in New York.

I. Mobilize to achieve the Millennium Development Goals

Secretary-General Ban singled out for special attention Declaration objectives with regard to poverty eradication and improved standards of living, which have since been grouped together as the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The General Assembly will hold a special MDG summit from 20-22 September, prior to its annual high-level debate.

“My hope is that the summit should generate a concrete plan for advancing action,” the Secretary-General said late this month. He will present his assessment on gaps and needs to the membership in March.

“The UN mission and the UN agencies are working flat out, 24 hours, seven days,” Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon told the media on 27 January, in the aftermath of the earthquake which devastated much of Haiti.

As of the end of January, the Haitian Government estimated that 112,400 deaths had resulted from the earthquake, with 196,000 injured. The UN confirmed 85 of its personnel had also perished, including the peacekeeping mission leaders, Hédi Annabi and Luiz Carlos Da Costa.

A rigorous post-disaster needs assessment is being drawn up by the United Nations, so that friends of Haiti can work effectively with the Government to lay plans for the country’s longer-term reconstruction. These plans are expected to be reviewed at UN Headquarters in March.

The effort will dovetail with the long-term development plans that had been set out, before the earthquake, by UN Special Envoy for Haiti Bill Clinton and others.

A key element in Haiti’s early recovery is a “Cash for Work” programme organized by the UN Development Programme. For the modest cost of $5 per person per day, it aims to put more than 200,000 Haitians back to work, rebuilding Haiti.

In the photo above, the Secretary-General and his former Spokesperson, Haitian national Michele Montas (right), meet with earthquake-displaced residents of Port-au-Prince, 17 January.
Progress at the global level on the first target of MDG 1, relating to extreme poverty, was interrupted by the global recession. Initial signs of economic recovery are building hope that progress can quickly resume, although job creation is lagging behind the recovery in many developed and developing countries. The second target of Goal 1, relating to hunger, is also at a crossroads. Under the impact of the recession, the number of the malnourished is estimated to have increased and now tops one billion people.

A strategy encompassing both aspects of Goal 1 has been designed by the High-Level Task Force on the Global Food Security Crisis, of UN agency chiefs, established by the Secretary-General in response to the 2008 food crisis. Noting that many of the difficulties in meeting growing world food needs are centered on the weakened state of small-scale farming in the developing world, the High-Level Task Force is rallying governments, donors, NGOs, businesses and the farmers themselves to support improved production and distribution methods.

Significantly, the most poverty-ridden areas of the world tend to be rural districts that are economically dependent on agriculture of one form or another. The Secretary-General is calling for follow-through on material commitments that were made last year, especially at the G8 summit in L’Aquila, Italy, and the November Food Summit in Rome.

On the health front, the Secretary-General has urged rapid and robust replenishment of the Global Fund for AIDS, TB and Malaria. Progress on the three diseases is another front in the MDG effort where international support needs to be sustained and scaled up.

The Secretary-General has said that Africa’s future is one of his top priorities. At the African Union Summit in January, he announced the creation of the MDG Advocacy Group of eminent personalities who will raise awareness on the Goals and Africa’s development priorities.

2. NEGOTIATE A BINDING AGREEMENT ON CLIMATE CHANGE

The urgency of addressing climate change was confirmed by the presence of the 119 Heads of State and Government at the Copenhagen Climate Change Conference in December 2009, several of whom engaged directly in negotiations. While many countries agreed to the Copenhagen Accord, which can help progress on reducing greenhouse gas emissions and expanding adaptation efforts, it still remains for all countries to produce a legally-binding agreement that effectively addresses what the science says is needed.

Negotiations for such an agreement will continue along two tracks: one, for a new commitment period under the Kyoto Protocol; and the other, for an agreement under the Bali Roadmap that would address responsibilities for non-Kyoto members, such as the United States, and for emerging developing countries.

There is a critical need to maintain the momentum generated by the Copenhagen Conference into 2010. This will require as many countries as possible associating themselves with the Copenhagen Accord, and to use elements from the Accord to reach a legally binding agreement in Mexico at the 16th Conference of the Parties this December.

Early in the year, many country groupings will be meeting, and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change will hold its first major meeting in Bonn this June. Some developing countries, however, have called for holding as many as five negotiating sessions before Mexico.

3. EMPOWER WOMEN

When the new UN gender entity, approved late last year by the General Assembly, comes into existence, women around the world will expect a scaling up of progress on this strategic objective. Gender issues will also be the main focus of the Economic and Social Council’s Annual Ministerial Review in late June. Presentations and analysis of progress and gaps remaining in fulfilling MDG 3 – promoting gender equality – could lend strategic momentum to women’s issues in the lead-up to the September MDG summit.

The focus of the Secretary-General’s UNITE to End Violence against Women campaign in 2010 will move to the regional and national levels, reinforced by the appointment of Ms. Margot Wallstrom as his new Special Representative on ending sexual violence in conflict-related situations.

Another obstacle to women’s empowerment is the lack of adequate medical care. Among the most endangered of the Millennium Development Goals is MDG 5 – improving maternal health. Difficult to measure, dependent on extension of medical services in remote areas, and too often overlooked as a priority, the health of mothers and infants has not been adequately protected.

4. MAKE PROGRESS TOWARD A NUCLEAR-FREE WORLD

Building on momentum from last year, the Secretary-General will open a May 2010 Review Conference of States Parties to the Treaty on Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) by advocating for measures to further strengthen the Treaty.

The Review Conference will attempt to bridge the differences between nuclear weapons states, which have been trying to limit the spread of nuclear weapons to other states, and non-nuclear-weapons states, which have stressed that nuclear disarmament by all should take precedence. Progress in May will require the nuclear weapons states to take real steps toward disarmament.

“I believe that 2010 can be a historic year for progress in disarmament and non-proliferation,” the Secretary-General told the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva in a video message in January. “My hope is based not on wishful thinking, but on real opportunities for concrete action.

“For my part, disarmament and non-proliferation will remain a
"priority. I will continue to build support for my Action Plan and do everything in my power to advance our efforts towards a world free of weapons of mass destruction."

A key element of the UN’s strategy is the creation of more nuclear weapons-free zones, in the Middle East as well as in North-East Asia, South Asia and Central Europe. Plans could be further developed during a Second Conference of States Parties and Signatories to Treaties that Establish Nuclear Weapon Free Zones, to be held in advance of the May 2010 NPT Review Conference.

5. Prevent and resolve deadly conflicts

“We will spare no effort to free our peoples from the scourge of war, whether within or between States,” world leaders pledged in the Millennium Declaration.

Strengthened capacities for mediation and preventive diplomacy are putting the UN in a better position to fulfil this objective, the Secretary-General notes in his “Agenda 2010.” Earlier deployment of these tools, along with the continued use of the Secretary-General’s good offices and moral authority in countries such as Iran, Myanmar and Sri Lanka, is expected this year, as well as action on old, frozen conflicts such as that which has divided Cyprus for decades.

The UN also remains engaged in existing conflicts, and its peacekeeping deployment reached record levels in 2009. Given the large-scale human and financial commitment, the Departments of Peacekeeping and Field Support are undertaking a far-ranging dialogue with all partners to adapt and strengthen the tool of UN peacekeeping, an initiative labeled as “New Horizon.” Its companion piece is a new Global Support Strategy for field operations. These reforms should shrink the time required to deploy peacekeeping personnel and equipment, and clarify the role of peacekeepers in the protection of civilians.

The Secretary-General plans support for the consolidation of post-conflict recovery in countries where the UN has made a significant investment to build and support peace processes, such as Burundi, Nepal, Sierra Leone and Timor-Leste. He will also focus UN engagement in volatile situations that are key to regional peace, such as in Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Iraq, Somalia, Sudan and the Middle East.

6. Advance on human rights and the rule of law

In 2010, the General Assembly will begin its review of the Human Rights Council. Now four years old, the Council has a sufficient track record to judge both its strengths and its flaws. Responding speedily to the tragic events in Haiti in January, the Council held a special session that addressed vulnerabilities present even before the earthquake – such as poverty and discrimination.

The May 2010 Review Conference for the International Criminal Court (ICC), to be held in Kampala, Uganda, “provides us with a clear opportunity to advance the cause of accountability for genocide and other serious crimes of concern for the international community,” Secretary-General Ban said on 11 January.

The ICC requires strong state support in order to end impunity and bring perpetrators of massive human rights violations to justice. Wide ratification of the Rome Statute (which established the Court), particularly by major powers, as well as cooperation with the Court’s orders, are essential.

7. Build a stronger UN

“Strengthening the United Nations” was a major plank of the year-2000 Millennium Declaration, and is a major focus for Secretary-General Ban. Reform of the world organization remains an ongoing priority.

The Secretariat will focus on rejuvenating management and developing the emerging leaders of the future. The campaign to make better use of up-to-date information and communication technologies will continue.

“All of this will enable the United Nations to react faster, more efficiently and more effectively on the mandates entrusted to us,” the Secretary-General told the General Assembly in his 11 January address.