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Implementing the MDGs - challenges and the role of the United Nations

Speech by Maher Nasser at the opening of the UN Academy in Budapest
on 24 September 2008

Mr. Chairman Dr. Gömbös,

Senior State Secretary Dr. Horváthné Fekszí Márta

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

Tisztelt hölgyeim és uraim!

Promoting the independence, participation and dignity of older persons has long been on the agenda of the United Nations and is central to implementation of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing. In adopting that Plan six years ago at the Second World Assembly on Ageing, UN Member States committed "to eliminating all forms of discrimination, including age discrimination". They recognized "that persons, as they age, should enjoy a life of fulfilment, health, security and active participation in the economic, social, cultural and political life of their societies". And they determined "to enhance the recognition of the dignity of older persons and to eliminate all forms of neglect, abuse and violence".

I would like to thank the United Nations Association of Hungary for inviting me to this event and also to congratulate them for choosing a timely theme for this year's UN Academy - a theme that is in line with a top priority for Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and the United Nations as a whole.

As you may be aware, there was a High Level Meeting on Africa's Development two days ago in New York which will be followed by a High Level Meeting tomorrow, also in New York on the Millennium Development Goals. In his opening remarks at the HLM on Africa's Development, SG Ban Ki-moon said that Africa's Development was one of his highest priorities as Secretary-General and that he had convened the MDG Africa Steering Group last year to galvanize international support. The work of the Steering Group gave a good idea of what is needed: The cost of achieving the MDGs in Africa will be about 72 billion dollars in external financing - a little over a quarter of what OECD countries spent last year on agricultural subsidies alone (around 267 billion dollars).

The outcome of the High Level meeting two days ago on Africa's Development and the one to be held tomorrow on the MDGs will feed into the Doha Review Conference on Financing for Development which will start in late November in Qatar. The Doha Review will provide an opportunity to address the critical issues of international economic cooperation and development.

The UN's focus on development and the MDGs is meant to ensure that efforts are multiplied to make achieving the MDGs possible, particularly now that the midpoint for achieving them has now passed.

We have listened this afternoon to several prominent and impressive speakers on a number of related themes ranging from whether there was a need for the United Nations, global challenges in the International year of Planet Earth to the International Day of Non-Violence (2 October) – remembering Mahatma Gandhi. In 2007, I had the pleasure of being part of the first observance of this international day in Cairo Egypt where I joined the Ambassador of India to Egypt (HE Ambassador Gopinathan) in inaugurating a photo exhibit documenting the life of Mahatma Gandhi, a

leader whose dedication to non-violence and the cause of peace remain unmatched. The concepts of non-violence and peace are crucial to development and therefore achieving the MDGs. It is therefore befitting that the observance of this day was included in today's programme.

For my part, I would like to offer a brief overview of the MDG 2008 Report and UN efforts to ensure that the promises made by World Leaders in 2000 are met by 2015, i.e. achieve the MDGs.

The Secretary-General of the United Nations, Mr. Ban Ki-moon seized the opportunity this week when world leaders are gathered in New York for the General Debate segment of the 63rd session of the General Assembly to organize the two high-level meetings I mentioned earlier. Secretary-General Ban also used his annual address to the General Assembly yesterday to call for Global Leadership to confront the multiple perils such as global financial crisis, global energy crisis and global food crisis, to deal with the trade talks that have collapsed, the out break of new wars and violence and new rhetoric of confrontation. Climate change was also highlighted by Secretary-General Ban in his opening address as one of the clear threats to our planet.

Earlier this month, and as part of the lead up process to these meetings, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon launched a report by the MDG Gap Task Force, entitled "Delivering on the Global Partnership for Achieving the Millennium Development Goals" and a more comprehensive one a week later on 11 September entitled 2008 Millennium Development Goals Report.

The main message of the first of these two reports, the MDG Gap Task Force Report 2008 focused on MDG 8 (Developing a Global Partnership for Development), is that while there has been progress on several counts, important gaps remain in delivering on the global commitments in the areas of aid, trade, debt relief, and access to new technologies and affordable essential medicines. The weakening of the world economy and the steep rises in food and energy prices threaten to reverse some of the progress made in the various dimensions of human development. The report argues that strengthening global partnerships are needed to avoid any reversal of progress made thus far. Urgent responses are needed to bridge the existing implementation gaps and deliver on the promises to achieve the MDGs. The High Level event tomorrow in New York will hopefully provide an opportunity to start bridging these gaps.

I regret that we do not have any hard copies of that report with us today, but you can access the full report online on the following link: <http://www.un.org/esa/policy/mdggap>.

The most comprehensive global assessment of where we are now in terms of achieving the MDGs is found in the Millennium Development Goals Report 2008, which was launched by SG Ban Ki-moon in New York on 11 September and we launched it in Vienna on 12 September. The Report provides hard evidence on what the world has done well and what needs to be done if we are to reach the Goals by 2015.

On the positive side, the Report shows that developing countries are devoting more resources to education and health – thanks mainly to reduced external debt servicing, fresh assistance and new financing from private foundations.

As a result, primary school enrolment is rising and progress on health and gender equality has also been achieved.

More importantly, on the overarching goal of reducing extreme poverty, new data from the World Bank shows that the proportion of people living in extreme poverty is indeed expected to decline by half by 2015.

Unfortunately however, progress in this area has been largely concentrated in Asia. Until recently, sub-Saharan Africa was losing ground in the fight against extreme poverty. For this reason, the report highlights that investment in agriculture is critical.

During the launch of this report in New York, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon expressed confidence that the MDGs are achievable as set out and agreed by world leaders in 2000. For that to be possible, he said, and I quote: "we must really galvanize political will and mobilize necessary resources and I count on the leadership of developed countries. I expect all participants to announce specific initiatives or commitments and lay out plans for them".

Middle Income Countries and emerging donors also face additional challenges that affect their ability to achieve the MDGs and deal with their specific needs. This category includes countries such as your own and I trust that you will be addressing the specific challenges faced here and how to overcome them.

Now to some dry and sad facts from the MDG 2008 Report: In the 21st century, over 500,000 women die every year during childbirth or pregnancy complications, About one quarter of developing world children are undernourished, about half of the world's population lacks proper sanitation facilities and over one third of the growing urban population in developing countries live in slums.

Worse still, many experts warn that

- global economic slowdown is likely to diminish the
- incomes of the poor,
- climate change will have a disproportionate impact on the already disadvantaged, and
- prevailing high food prices are expected to push millions of people in poverty.

Nevertheless, there is still hope to react effectively to these challenges. If I may quote the Secretary-General's words: "In most cases, we already know what needs to be done, and how. Now we need an aggressive push to get the world on track." That aggressive push is what all the reports and meetings I mentioned are all about. Events such as this one here today is another important effort to raise awareness about the promise made by world leaders eight years ago to reach goals for development around the world as this is not only vital to building better, healthier and decent lives for millions of people, it is also essential to building enduring global peace and security.

In addition to what is being done in New York at the political level and in the field by UN organizations such as UNDP, UNICEF, FAO, WFP and others I wanted to give some examples of how some Vienna Based Organizations contribute to the global effort to achieve the MDGs, particularly as Vienna is my new duty station.

In cooperation with scientists and farmers, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) works to produce hardier and healthier wheat Under national and regional projects, IAEA in cooperation with Scientists and Farmers, pioneer hardier, healthier wheat. In Africa alone, six new varieties of crops have been officially released - plants with higher yield, improved nutrition, and more hardy characteristics for harsh environments. This includes new varieties of sesame in Egypt, cassava in Ghana, wheat in Kenya, banana in Sudan and finger millet and cotton in Zambia.

Another example is the work done by the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) in setting up programmes that promote enterprise development and investment promotion in developing countries targeting women.

For its part, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) works with other UN entities within the joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS to combat this disease, particularly as around 10 per cent of all new HIV infections worldwide are due to injecting drug use. UNODC supports countries and civil society organizations in developing and implementing comprehensive HIV/AIDS prevention and care programmes for injecting drug users.

The examples I mentioned were meant to illustrate that even when your focus is on something that seems unrelated to the MDGs, you can still be part of the global effort to achieve them. With that in mind, I wanted to mention a global campaign that started in 2006 when 23 million people stood up on the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty and read a message calling on world leaders to keep their Millennium promises. Last year, over 43 million people around the world Stood Up and Spoke Out Against Poverty. This year's event will take place from 17-19 October and we hope that even more people will break the Guinness World Record of the number of people who stood up against poverty. You can organize your own event and register online. More details on this on our website: www.unis.unvienna.org

Thank you, Köszönöm