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United Nations
P a k i s t a n 

Improving lives and helping people



Agriculture, Rural Development, and Poverty Reduction

'Group of 77' developing countries critical to overcoming global crises, Ban says

23 January 2009 – The cooperation of developing nations is critical to overcome the concurrent crises in finance, climate change, global health and extreme poverty, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon told the 'Group of 77' States, at a ceremony where the leadership of the powerful caucus passed from Antigua and Barbuda to Sudan.

"The crises that erupted last year highlighted the interdependence of economies and countries," Mr. Ban said in **remarks** read out by Deputy Secretary-General Asha-Rose Migiro to the Group, which was established in 1964 by 77 States, but now represents more than 130 countries, usually including China.

"As we move into 2009, these global challenges remain. They threaten to undo the progress made towards the development goals of the last decade," he added, stressing

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that efforts to meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that aim to slash poverty and other ills by 2015 required the hard work of all.

In that light, Mr. Ban stressed the importance of cooperation between developing countries and expressed appreciation for the Group’s strong support for his efforts to strengthen the development pillar of the UN. He promised to continue to work to increase the effectiveness of those efforts across the system

However, peace and security, development and human rights – the fundamentals of the UN Charter – are interdependent, especially in Africa, where people “so desperately need peace for development.”

“I sincerely hope that Sudan’s leadership of the Group of 77 and China will accelerate efforts to find an acceptable resolution of these conflicts,” he said.

Also addressing the handover ceremony, General Assembly President Miguel D’Escoto recalled his association with the caucus since its inception and listed some of its achievements.

Mr. D’Escoto said he looked forward to working with the Sudan Chairmanship in a spirit of “collective responsibility” with other groups and Member States to enhance the relevance and vitality of the General Assembly.

“This is the best way to promote more effective multilateralism and deepen our cooperation and demonstrate our leadership on complex issues, including the ongoing reform of the United Nations,” he said.



Handover ceremony of the chairmanship of the Group of 77

Education

UNICEF condemns attacks on schools in Pakistan

GENEVA, 23 January 2009 - UNICEF is deeply concerned about the increasing number of attacks on school buildings in north-western Pakistan.

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“UNICEF condemns these attacks, which rob children of their basic right to education and have a devastating impact on their lives” said Daniel Toole, UNICEF’s Regional Director for South Asia.

In a recent assault, five schools were blown up in Pakistan’s Swat district and similar attacks continue to be reported.

Since 2007, more than 170 government and private schools, particularly girls’ schools, have been blown up or burned down in the Federally Administered Tribal Area and the North West Frontier Province, reportedly by illegal armed groups. More schools have also closed due to occupation by illegal armed groups or security forces, or due to their female teachers being threatened.

Schools must be able to fully function to ensure the education of tens of thousands of students in the area. The government, development agencies, communities and parents in Pakistan have been working hard to overcome obstacles that can deter children, especially girls, from attending school. They understand that education is a fundamental human right and that it supports and fosters other rights like health, nutrition and protection. Education is also essential to restoring normalcy, especially in conflict situations.

In times of peace and in conflicts or emergencies, schools must be safe spaces for children. UNICEF calls on all groups, and particularly the government of Pakistan, to intensify efforts to protect schools, students and teachers in the areas of military operations.

“Attacks that target schools, educational institutions, children and teachers are unacceptable and must cease immediately,” Toole said.

All children, including girls, must have unimpeded access to education. Girls who receive quality education are more empowered and better prepared to protect

themselves against violence, abuse and exploitation

Health & Population

China to ring in New Year with UN-backed anti-tobacco campaign

26 January 2009 – The United Nations World Health Organization (WHO) is helping China – home of some 350 million



smokers – celebrate the New Year through a campaign seeking to bring an end to the tradition of giving cigarettes as gifts.

One third of the world’s smokers reside in China, according to **WHO** statistics, while the Chinese Ministry of Health said the number of deaths attributed to lung cancer have soared over 450 per cent in the past three decades.

The campaign by the China Center for Disease Control and Prevention, endorsed by the Health Ministry and WHO, endeavours to equate giving cigarettes with bodily harm and endorse better health during this Year of the Ox.

It warns that gifting tobacco means sending “wishes with lung cancer and other respiratory diseases to your friends.”

The new initiative also said that sending cigarettes is the equivalent of wishing “heart diseases, strokes and other respiratory diseases to your colleagues.”

China is both the world’s largest producer and consumer of tobacco, growing one third of the global crop and manufacturing one third of its cigarettes.

WHO said that there are around one million tobacco-related deaths annually, which is one in four such deaths worldwide.

New funding enables UN agencies to further research children's medicines



US\$ 9.7 million grant from Gates Foundation to help crucial research on children's medicines

21 January 2009 – Two United Nations agencies will be able to boost research into “child size” medicines designed and formulated specifically for children thanks to a \$9.7 million grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

“The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation grant will contribute to accelerating work on investigating, clarifying and communicating to partners, including industry, what the needs of children are in terms of medicines and dosages to more effectively fight child morbidity and mortality,” said Hanne Bak Pedersen, Deputy-Director for the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) Supply Division.

UNICEF and the UN World Health Organization (WHO) noted in a joint news **release** that many medicines available today are only designed for adults.

“More than 50 per cent of medicines prescribed for children have either not been developed specifically for children or have not been proven to be effective and safe for their use,” the agencies stated.

As a result, many children lack access to essential treatment because no suitable paediatric dosage or formulation of the necessary medicine exists, or those that do exist are not available or are too expensive.

Also, sometimes healthcare workers and parents use fractions of adult dosage forms or prepare “makeshift” prescriptions of medicines by crushing tablets or dissolving portions of capsules in water.

“We must take the guesswork out of medicines for children,” said WHO Assistant Director-General Carissa Etienne. “Children are suffering and dying from diseases we can treat, and yet we lack the critical evidence needed to deliver appropriate, effective, affordable medicines that might save them.”

Dr. Hans Hogerzeil, Director of Essential Medicines and Pharmaceutical Policies at WHO, noted that some progress has been made on children’s medicines but too many medicines are still given to children that have never been properly tested for them. “This work is an excellent example of coordination of United Nations agencies and key experts in the world to address this urgent problem.”

The grant will enable research to determine the optimum dosage forms for paediatric medicines; develop dosing guides; and develop guidelines for testing, treatment and use of medicines in children, including guidelines on conducting clinical trials in children.

This work follows the WHO-led “make medicines child size” initiative launched in December 2007, which focuses on improving access to better medicines for children.

Health amid a financial crisis: a complex diagnosis

The global financial crisis could have profound implications for the health spending plans of national governments. Unless countries have safety nets in place, the poor and vulnerable will be the first to suffer. Jane Parry and Gary Humphreys report.

Dr Suwit Wibulpolprasert, senior adviser on disease control at Thailand’s Ministry of Public Health, remembers the last time the wheels came off the global economy. “There was less travel and purchase of cars and motorcycles. Sales of alcohol – as well as tobacco – were reduced. These factors resulted in fewer deaths and injuries in road accidents,” he says.

Wibulpolprasert's rather upbeat remarks underscore the complexity of the situation faced by public health officials, health-care professionals and patients around the world, as falling asset values, volatile exchange rates and shrinking industrial output complicate the business of getting health care to the people who need it.



WHO/J L Ray

In a recession it is important for governments to protect the poor and vulnerable, particularly mothers and children, such as these in Bangladesh.

This complexity is familiar to health economists.

"There are so many offsetting factors that do not necessarily lead to one-sided effects on health," says David Evans, director of the department of Health Systems Financing at the World Health Organization (WHO). Examples of this abound. In an economic crisis, governments may use their health budgets more effectively by switching to more generic drugs. Governments – as in the case of Mexico, Thailand and the Republic of Korea among others – may also take new social protection measures.

"In a recession it is important for governments to protect the poor and

vulnerable, but most countries have not yet done this," Evans says, adding that WHO has long been helping countries develop universal health protection mechanisms that are a vital safety net in times of economic turmoil.

The current financial crisis that started with the collapse of the sub-prime mortgage market in North America and parts of Europe in 2007 has since extended to low- and middle-income countries. Hungary has received emergency financial support from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and other countries are in talks to secure similar IMF packages. But such support could limit governments' ability to spend on health. And while developing countries are not yet in recession – defined as two consecutive quarters of negative economic growth – economists are concerned about the global downturn. Some fear it could be as bad or even worse than the great depression of the 1930s.

The World Bank currently forecasts growth for the global economy of 1% in 2009, including a contraction of about 0.1% for developed countries. The only silver lining in the gathering clouds for net importers of commodities is that oil, food and commodity prices have fallen. As bleak as the situation appears to be, it is hard to gauge the implications of all of this for people's health around the world.

That's why health economists are looking at past recessions and their effect on health care to shine some light on the current crisis. The IMF identifies three periods of global recession in the past 20 years: 1990–93; 1997–98; 2001–02. The last two were driven by financial crises and are, in some ways, similar to the current crisis.

One of the clearest trends economists have identified is that in all three recessions total commitments of official development assistance (ODA) declined. While, ODA for health increased during the 1990–93 recession, it fell more than overall ODA commitments in the two subsequent recessions. Economists, however, qualify this

by saying that disbursement data before 2002 are not accurate.

WHO's Director-General Dr Margaret Chan has urged affluent countries not to reduce ODA or to cut spending on health, education and social protection. "Both of these responses have occurred in the past. And both could be as ... devastating for health, development, security and prosperity as they were in the past."

Beyond the decline in ODA, another striking fact economists point out is that total health expenditure has tended to fall in countries affected by recession. But not always, and here, the key factor is government policy. Some countries have protected government health spending and others have not.

Meanwhile, out-of-pocket expenditure on health care tends to fall during recessions because people are less affluent and avoid spending money, or they leave private sector health care and turn to public services. This is what happened during the 1997–98 economic crisis in the Republic of Korea when, according to Professor Bong-min Yang of the School of Public Health, Seoul National University, there was "a clear shift" of patients from private hospitals and clinics to public health centres.

Similar outcomes are to be expected in the current recession. For example, in the United Kingdom employees with private insurance who lose their jobs may fall back on public health services. In countries where public sector health programmes are already under strain, an increase in demand for those services could cause additional problems.

But such shifts are not always negative, as noted by Dr Viroj Tangcharoensathien, the director of the International Health Policy Program, Thailand. "After the crisis of 1997, the private sector collapsed due to significant demand reductions, and a number of private-sector doctors applied to return to the government sector," Tangcharoensathien says.

Indeed recessions are full of seemingly contradictory trends. Mortality rates, for example, increase in some countries, but not in others.

In Thailand adult mortality increased in 1996–99. In Peru child mortality increased in 1989. In Mexico, mortality among children and the elderly was 5–7% higher in the crisis years of 1995–96 than in non-crisis years, according to Felicia Marie Knaul, an economist at the Mexican Health Foundation, citing an article she published with David Cutler and other colleagues in the *Journal of Public Economics* in 2002. They also found that more people faced financial ruin or were impoverished by paying for health services.

But increased mortality is by no means always the case, and it varies depending on the economic status of the country. In the United States of America (USA) and western Europe, for example, there is evidence that mortality actually falls during recessions, with the decreased use of alcohol and tobacco. There may also be reduced pollution, due to lower industrial output, and fewer road collisions because of less traffic.

The Republic of Korea is an interesting example of how difficult it is to generalize about economic recession and its effect on health. "The economic crisis has had a negative impact on consumer purchasing power, so it is expected to have a negative impact on health-care expenditure too," says Professor Soonman Kwon from the department of Health Policy and Management at Seoul National University. But he then points out that the Kim Dae-jung government, which came to power in 1998, right after the IMF rescue loan, actually expanded health-care programmes as part of a broader policy to extend the safety net for disadvantaged groups. "[this] government ... introduced new programmes, such as expanding the benefit coverage and integrating a number of health insurance providers into a single payer, so I cannot foresee a sudden decrease in health-care spending [now]," Kwon says.

And just as the impact of recession on health varies from country to country, so too do the recessions any given country may experience. In 1997, the Thai *baht* lost 50% of its value against the US dollar, pushing drug procurement costs for the government through the roof. This time the crisis has so far expressed itself in the form of a drop in consumer demand from the USA and Europe, which is hitting Thailand's exports, but leaving the agricultural sector unscathed. "The sense of urgency, or acute crisis is less than it was in 1997," says Tangcharoensathien. His colleague, Wibulpolprasert, is similarly sanguine: "Going into this economic crisis, we already have a social safety net in place – a universal health-care system instituted in 2002."

In contrast to many traditional economists, Tangcharoensathien believes that one of the best ways to protect this system is to reduce infrastructure development, such as transport and railways, and to maintain support of the country's health services. In other words, government policy will make the difference – a constant that can be relied upon whether a country is in a recession or not.

Mexico also learned its lessons from the 1995–96 crisis. Many people in need of health care struggled to pay their health bills or became impoverished in doing so. A rise in poverty and the devastating health effect of this led to the establishment in 1997 of an anti-poverty programme, *Progres*a now called *Oportunidades*, which gives poor families cash incentives to go for regular health checks and get their children vaccinated.

The crisis in Mexico also led to a 2003 health reform that established the *Seguro Popular* universal health insurance scheme. About 45% of the 103 million population has access to health insurance through social security. "By 2010, everyone will be eligible for public health insurance under the *Seguro Popular* scheme," Knaul says, adding: "Economic crisis should motivate the expansion of coverage. The danger is that budget cuts will stall the process and leave families unprotected when they most need it."

Environment

UN-backed gathering calls for greater action on climate change in Asia-Pacific

Nukunonu Atoll seaside, one of the regions of the world vulnerable to climate change



22 January 2009

– A United Nations-backed conference wrapped up in Bangkok with an urgent call to governments and the private sector in the Asia-Pacific region to prioritize climate change concerns.

Drawing nearly 300 participants from business, government, civil society and international organizations, the event – organized by the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (**ESCAP**) and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) – focused on risks and opportunities posed by global warming.

"I think we have come some way here today with some innovative suggestions, but I want to emphasize that the discussion cannot stop here," said Noeleen Heyzer, ESCAP Executive Secretary. "It needs to continue and deepen to arrive at suggestions on a very practical level, at national, regional as well as global levels."

She also urged the creation of an Asia-Pacific business network to formulate ways to effectively address climate change in the region, with South and South-East Asia considered as "hotspots" that are at particular risk for cyclones, flooding and other extreme weather events.

The outcome from the forum will help prepare for the UN climate change conference slated to be held in December in Copenhagen, Denmark, where negotiations on a successor pact to the Kyoto Protocol are slated to end.

Cross Cutting Themes/Other Issues

Ban welcomes US decision to close Guantánamo Bay detention centre



President Barack Obama

23 January 2009 – Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon welcomed the decision by United States President Barack Obama to begin the process of closing the detention facility in Guantánamo Bay.

Echoing a statement issued yesterday by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay, Mr. Ban also hailed the new US leader's orders to review detention policies and introduce measures to ensure lawful interrogations, as well as the Administration's ban on certain types of interrogation.

"The United Nations has previously called for the closure of the Guantánamo Bay detention facility, and is encouraged that President Obama has given the highest priority to ensuring respect for fundamental rights," Mr. Ban's spokesperson **said** in a statement.

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Mr. Ban also said he looks forward to working with all UN Member States to tackle terrorism "while fully respecting international human rights obligations."

Also welcoming yesterday's signing of the executive orders by Mr. Obama, two UN independent human rights experts stressed

that the US Government should fully respect all human rights obligations, including the prohibition of torture and the non-refoulement principle that forbids removing people to countries where they could be tortured.

Leandro Despouy, the Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers, and Manfred Nowak, the Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, stressed that they are prepared to lend their full support to settling outstanding issues, especially those in relation to closing the Guantánamo facilities.

Starring role for UN in new documentary premiering in New York



Kiyotaka Akasaka, Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information

21 January 2009 – A new film casting the work of the United Nations in the starring role has its world premiere at the Organization's Headquarters in New York.

"Planet UN" is a documentary featuring the world body at the beginning of the 21st century as it takes on the enormous challenges threatening global stability today and in the future.

The film calls for an unprecedented and concerted global effort to confront threats such as food and energy shortages, climate change, terrorism, nuclear threats and the collapse of the international financial system among others.

"Through the exploration of three major themes: peacekeeping, development and human rights, this film presents a look at the UN as it works to confront the challenges of this century," UN Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information

Kiyo Akasaka told a news conference ahead of tonight's premiere.

In addition to academic and diplomatic dignitaries, including Noam Chomsky, the documentary highlights interviews with Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon along with a number of other senior UN officials.

The 52-minute film is directed by French documentary-maker Romuald Sciora, who created four television shorts in 2006 called the Glass Building, which included footage of former Secretaries-General reminiscing about the 60-year history of the world body.

Underscoring the need to create awareness of the UN, Mr. Sciora said, "In the West we really don't know what the UN is doing for the population of particular countries. In some countries the UN is the only thing that is helping them on a daily basis."

In a bid to reach a wider audience, a Marvel comic strip is planned for publication with action heroes, such as Spiderman and Batman, appearing in scenes focusing on the work of the UN.

"You'll find this refreshing and lively in terms of how the UN is portrayed in a very genuine way," said Amir Dossal, Executive Director of the UN Office for Partnerships.

A book with the same name published by Le Monde Diplomatique and Harper's Magazine is also slated to accompany the film along with a DVD.

For more information on the United Nations and its activities, please visit the main UN website at www.un.org or the UN Pakistan website at www.un.org.pk

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