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UN OFFICE OF THE HIGH REPRESENTATIVE FOR THE LEAST DEVELOPED COUNTRIES, LANDLOCKED DEVELOPING COUNTRIES AND SMALL ISLAND DEVELOPING STATES

United Nations
The impact of climate change is being felt, particularly in Least Developed Countries. The very existence of some Small Island Developing States (SIDS) is threatened, as remnants of melting icecaps encroach on lands that stand mere meters above sea level. President Mohamed Nasheed of the Maldives is already considering relocation strategies for his country's roughly 300,000 inhabitants.

For landlocked developing states, changing weather patterns have caused desertification, water shortages, and interrupted crop seasons. With food security threatened, the situation exacerbates hunger and causes conflict over scarce resources.

Cases of certain infectious diseases, such as Malaria, have shown up in areas where they previously could not survive.

One question at the core of the negotiations leading up to the Copenhagen summit is this: As developing nations are bearing the brunt of the impact of industrialized nations' historically heavy greenhouse gas emissions, who will pay for climate change adaptation and mitigation efforts?

To be sure, efforts are already underway to educate developing countries' populations on the causes and effects of climate change, as well as to invest in clean energy, technology transfers, and other protections against climate change's looming consequences.

Least Developed Countries have also made substantial efforts to amplify their voices in the process leading up to Copenhagen through a series of recommendations and internal negotiations. Their strategy has been to focus on the areas where climate change unites, rather than divides, the developing countries.

A number of issues will have to be worked out in order to reach a consensus at the Copenhagen summit on the financial and moral obligations required of each country in order to save the planet from the impending climate crisis. In an interview with The Commitment, H.E. Dr. Dessima M. Williams, Permanent Representative of Grenada to the United Nations and Chair of the Alliance for Small Island States, posed a question to the international community: “Isn’t it important to save each and every one of us, rather than to continue the lifestyle that threatens some of us?”

In this issue of The Commitment, we delve deeper into the complex causes and implications of climate change, explore ways in which South-South partnerships are finding innovative solutions, and highlight ways in which UN-OHRLLS is contributing to a more sustainable and equitable world.
The Path to Recovery Lies in Partnership and Mutual Cooperation

Message from the High Representative

Cheick Sidi Diarra, Under-Secretary-General and High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries, and Small Island Developing States

Faced with a deepening global financial crisis, the international community swung into action in June at the UN Conference on the World Financial and Economic Crisis and Its Impact on Development and adopted a sweeping action plan to help blunt the impact of the economic downturn, especially for developing countries. This was both a necessary move and a profoundly symbolic gesture signaling the commitment of the Member States to band together in support of those countries most in need.

The collapse of the US sub-prime mortgage loans in the middle of 2007 was one of the main triggers for a chain of economic woes which resulted in the most severe financial crisis since the Great Depression in the 1930s. Only this time due to international economic interdependence, the failure of one financial system directly affected the rest of the world forcing globalized economies into a recession. And while developed countries could turn to their reserves and safety nets for a temporary solution, the Least Developed Countries – due to a lack of reserves, high dependence on remittances, and inadequate social safety nets – were among the first group of countries to feel the consequences of the global financial crisis.

The jury is still out on the full ramifications of the global crisis on the LDCs, but it is clear that without the help of the international community, these 49 countries will undoubtedly see a spike in poverty rates, which will in turn lead to increased hunger, a higher incidence of child and maternal mortality, and a greater spread of diseases.

As the global community commits itself to tackle the crisis head-on, we should remind ourselves that the LDCs represent the poorest and the weakest segment of humanity. Therefore, the path to successful recovery lies in partnership and mutual cooperation. We cannot do it on our own, but together we are strong enough to carry the burdens of each other, and succeed by helping each other overcome the challenges ahead.

High Representative for LDCs Raises the Alarm over Urban Overpopulation

By Alison Walkley, MediaGlobal Correspondent

Cheick Sidi Diarra, Special Adviser on Africa and High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries, and Small Island Developing States spoke at the Conference on Sustainable Urbanization in the Information Age: The Role of Infrastructure in Metropolitan Development at the United Nations in May this year. Diarra discussed urban population growth and forthcoming impacts of climate change, identifying better infrastructure planning as a key aid in the achievement of sustainable global urban development.

Diarra noted that Africa, home to 33 of the world’s 49 Least Developed Countries (LDCs), has “the highest urban growth rate in the world. If current trends continue, half of Africa’s population will be urban by 2050, severely testing the infrastructure and basic social services… Climate change will only make the situation worse”.

This is especially true for LDCs and Small Island Developing States (SIDS) which are more susceptible to the negative effects of natural disasters, poverty, and marginalization in the global economy.”

Without provision of basic services to this fast increasing urban population, the LDCs and SIDS cannot achieve sustainable development,” Diarra explained. “There must be comprehensive planning and investment in urban housing with secure tenure, basic infrastructure, and services… Unplanned or poorly planned urban settlements only increase the toll that natural disasters have on infrastructure and lives.”

Diarra urged the international community to take a stake in these vulnerable countries. “Poor countries should be assisted to access technologies [and] to develop capacity for disaster preparedness,” he said. “Developing

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Several Small Island States are Fighting for their Survival

Ambassador Dessima Williams, Grenada’s Permanent Representative to the United Nations calls on the international community to adopt an ambitious package of climate change proposals from the 42-member Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), of which she is the Chairman

Interview with Nosh Nalavala, Bureau Chief, MediaGlobal

The world’s small island developing states (SIDS) are often cited as the most vulnerable countries to climate impact and the first nations to face critical climate change thresholds. Yet they have contributed least to the growing concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere and so have the least responsibility for the crisis the world now faces. How do you react to this imbalance?

This introduces the concepts of “climate debt” and “climate divide.” What you have described is the climate divide — that is, the least contributors of green house gases are the biggest net recipients of the negative effects of climate change. That’s the divide. The climate debt means that we have to ask whether or not, based on this divide, there is an obligation due on the part of the larger emitters to the more recent participants in the global economy.

This issue was raised in June in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCC) as well…

Yes, at the Second Preparatory Conference of the UNFCCC process in June this issue was raised. There was a major global panel on it, and from the four major presenters — a scientist, an academic, and public policy personalities — as well as from the scores of delegates present, it seems that there is a developing consensus that “climate divide” and “climate debt” are useful concepts.

You chair the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS). These states share similar development challenges and concerns about the environment, especially their vulnerability to the adverse effects of global climate change. At all the international conferences, you are least likely to be heard at the negotiating table as the SIDS lack the political weight of the major emitters. Do you plan to change that in your capacity as Chairman?

AOSIS has been involved in the international conversation on this from the start in Montreal in 2005. In fact, AOSIS has been around since the late 1980’s and the 1994 Barbados Plan of Action is among our early public international positions. Since 2007, we have had a consummate group of about 50 climate change negotiators from our three sub regions (African/Indian Ocean, Caribbean and Pacific regions), who continue to be seriously engaged in the development of the 2009 negotiating process.

But are you being heard?

Yes, we are being heard. It is true that our very ambitious carbon emissions reduction targets have not yet attracted many developed nations. But they are very much part of the many proposals under active consideration by groups of states. In fact, in support of that, we have intensified our external campaign in concert with our presence in the “negotiating room”. I take this opportunity to invite your readers to listen to our arguments, study our proposals and encourage your governments to support and adopt them.

At large conferences too?

Of course. I am speaking now about our engagement with the UNFCCC process. We have made formal proposals submissions to the UNFCCC. We have made recommendations to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the IPCC. And importantly, as I said, we are there in every meeting, fully and seriously engaged and negotiating. AOSIS also participates as members of the Group of 77 and China, the largest coalition in the climate change negotiating process. We are working together, particularly as regards our small island concerns with broader issues such as response measures, forest issues, and the carbon trading issues and the form of the agreement envisioned for the second commitment period at the end of this year. We expect to be engaged right up through and into Copenhagen, December 2009. Slowly but surely, AOSIS is being heard. We have funding, we have delegations, we have positions. We are quite active in the formal process and we also work behind the scenes.

In 2004, Grenada, considered to be outside the hurricane belt, was devastated when Hurricane Ivan struck, destroying over 90 percent of the country’s infrastructure and housing stock and causing over $800 million in damages, the equivalent of 200 percent of Grenada’s gross domestic product. Do you feel that the international community has ignored the constraints of the small islands, especially Grenada?

Not entirely, but the challenge we face is to get sufficient traction around strong agreements which will confirm what we know: that there are certain critical thresholds we should not breach, because in doing so the first “victims” will be the SIDS, the small island developing states. We
will not be the only climate change victims, but we will be among the very first and the very worst. So let me put AOSIS metrics on record here: the earth and ocean have arrived at almost 0.8 degrees warming above pre-industrial levels. With that, you already see the negative climatic outcomes – Ivans; Katrinas, desertifications, drought, loss of fresh water and food insecurity; even the polar is melting and king tides are washing over roads, homes and communities. If we allow temperatures to rise over 2 degrees Centigrade, double what it is now, as some are proposing, then the probability of greater climate catastrophe (especially for small islands), will be 50-50. And so AOSIS insists, and this is important, that we agree to not more than 1.5 degrees centigrade temperature increases and that we take both immediate and medium-term steps to achieve that. We believe that a greater increase could be catastrophic.

Climate change, coastal development, overfishing and pollution are the major threats. The Caribbean has the largest proportion of corals in high extinction risk categories, but reefs in the Indian Ocean and the Pacific are also likely to be decimated. Sea level rises, flooding, and storm surges are a particular concern for the atoll states in the Pacific and Indian Oceans. Are concerted steps being taken by SIDS to take urgent immediate action?

Yes, many AOSIS countries are making a good faith effort to secure their populations and their lands. Public education is a major component of the early-warning system and the disaster risk reduction preparedness. Physical responses have been to build seawalls, to physically relocate coastal populations who are under threat, and to organize more sturdy fishing industry, improved coastal management (including mangroves) and biodiversity as a system of land and crop security. But we have to do the ultimate, which is to keep the earth from heating and the oceans from rising beyond safe levels. We can only do that by reducing carbon emissions, which reduces temperature rises and reduces sea-level rises. That's the methodology that will best protect vulnerable populations in vulnerable areas such as small islands and low-lying coastal areas.

“This is all about survival of humans and our planet... It’s not about which group will lead. It is about the safe survival of the planet, starting with the protection of the AOSIS millions, one-fifth of the UN population, who have contributed least to this crisis.”

Today small island states are striving to achieve long-term sustainable development and implement the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Climate change impacts are already undermining their efforts. The first MDG – to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger – is being affected by changing patterns of food production. Are you concerned that lack of food will impact several small islands? And what are the island countries doing to stanch the economic impact hitting them hard?

First of all we are speaking up, taking action at home and participating globally in the search for solutions. For example, amongst the LDCs and the island states there is a convergence – the convergence of the food crisis with the economic and financial crisis with the climate crisis and in some cases, health, whether it be tuberculosis, HIV, or of child health problems. So we are speaking out about this potentially explosive situation from a sustainable development point of view. AOSIS’ proposal also calls for new and additional funding that is easily accessible to respond to both the financial and economic crisis and the climate challenge. Another ongoing strategy is international cooperation, including private-public partnerships in new climate-sensitive technology development and capacity building.

AOSIS members are participating actively in the Bali process, which seeks to find an appropriate global climate regime to succeed the Kyoto Protocol’s first commitment period, which expires in 2012. The AOSIS negotiating position for the Bali process is entitled No Island Left Behind. It outlines three long-term strategic objectives: an ambitious long-term goal for reducing greenhouse gas emissions; more funding for adaptation, with priority access given to SIDS on an expedited basis based on their specific vulnerabilities and lack of capacity; and, SIDS need support and technical assistance to build capacity and gain access to technologies to respond and adapt to climate change across a wide range of socio-economic sectors. Have you seen any tangible results to these initiatives?

AOSIS proposals are very concrete, very specific and, from a scientific perspective, very viable. Compute them and you will see they are economically viable. They serve as a measuring rod for ourselves and for others and through them, we invite others to come on board. Indeed, a major plank of our negotiating package is also to have a legally binding agreement from Copenhagen. This is all about survival of humans and our planet. It’s not about carbon, or how much we can and will spend, or about who will put the best figures on the table, whose ideas will begin to “Seal the Deal”. It’s not about which group will lead. It is about the safe survival of the planet, starting with the immediate protection of the AOSIS millions, one-fifth of the UN population, who have contributed least to this crisis, but who are on the frontlines now with solutions that will benefit all.
The temperature in Mongolia has risen almost 2 degrees Celsius over the last 40 years, and according to the 4th Assessment of the International Panel on Climate Change, another rise of 2.5 to 5 degrees is anticipated. Already, the country is experiencing lower precipitation, disappearing water sources, and decreased vegetation.

Herders have complained about decreased productivity in the steppes, or grassland plains, which affect their livestock's ability to graze. With livestock production accounting for 45 percent of employment and 19 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) as of 2003, the economic and social consequences of climate change could be devastating.

Perhaps best known for its nomadic tribes, once unified under Genghis Khan, Mongolia is the second largest landlocked country in the world with over 1.5 million square kilometers of landmass, more than 80 percent of which is made up of steppes. Bordered by China in the South and Russia in the North, its population of fewer than three million inhabitants makes Mongolia the most sparsely populated independent country. Roughly 30 percent of the population remains nomadic to some extent, and its nomadic herders comprise the backbone of the economy.

Mongolia’s GDP per capita stands at US $3,200. Its GDP growth rate is nearly 9 percent, after slowing from just under 10 percent in 2007 amid the global financial and economic crisis. Roughly 36 percent of the population lives in poverty.

According to the 2006 Human Development Index, Mongolia ranked 112th out of 179 countries with data. Its statistics are encouraging with a more than 97 percent literacy rate and a nearly 90 percent secondary school enrollment rate.

Besides livestock, the Mongolian economy is driven by mining, and among its major exports are copper, coal, cashmere, wool, and hides. More than 70 percent of Mongolian exports go to its neighboring China, and as a member of the World Trade Organization since 1997 it is currently seeking to expand its participation in Asian regional economic and trade regimes.

Yet, as with many landlocked countries, Mongolia’s trade is impeded by its distance from the sea, which makes it dependent on roads and infrastructure in transit countries. According to Cheick Sidi Diarra, High Representative for Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States, overall exports from LLDCs amount to less than 1 percent of world trade, and nine of the ten least efficient trade nations in the world are LLDCs.

For Mongolia, nearly 80 percent of exports are duty-free, however, non-tariff restrictions exist including burdensome customs procedures, long processing times, and poor transport and information technology infrastructure. Transit transport costs amount to roughly 8 percent of the country’s GDP.

Speaking in the Mongolian capital of Ulaanbaatar recently, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon called Mongolia a “pioneer for landlocked developing countries.” He underscored the fact that in 1994 the country established and served as the first chair of the Group of LLDCs, and later in 2007, hosted a meeting of LLDC trade ministers.

The Secretary-General traveled to Ulaanbaatar to discuss the impact of
countries would also benefit from exchange of information and best practices in the management of urban growth, both amongst themselves and with the developed countries.

The outcomes of the conference means that participants continue to work to raise further awareness of positive infrastructure planning and the role of information communication technology in sustainable engineering, architecture, and urban planning.

“Without provision of basic services to this fast increasing urban population, the LDCs and SIDS cannot achieve sustainable development.”

– Cheick Sidi Diarra

The current concentration of poverty and environmental degradation in cities can easily lead us to the wrong conclusion that urbanization is not desirable,” Diarra acknowledged. “On the contrary, well managed urbanization presents immense opportunities for new economic activities, more efficient delivery of social services, improved access to emergency services, and, of course, better access to modern infrastructure. But these benefits can only be realized if we plan well and act in time.”

“Mongolia might be landlocked, but your constructive foreign policy of good neighborhood relations, dialogue and cooperation is the key to unlocking the door to an inclusive globalization and win-win solutions.”

– UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon
SMALL ISLANDS AND LEAST DEVELOPED COUNTRIES JOIN FORCES ON CLIMATE CHANGE. Two major blocs of the world’s most vulnerable countries joined forces in August demanding that the new Copenhagen climate agreement limit temperature increases to as far below 1.5 degrees Celsius as possible. Speaking in Bonn in preparation for the Copenhagen Climate Summit in December, negotiators and envoys representing the world’s Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and Least Developed Countries (LDCs) joined together in expressing dismay at the current lack of progress and ambition in the talks. Consistent with their 1.5 degree temperature target, the 80 countries that make up the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) and the Group of LDCs are now united in calling for industrialized countries to together reduce their greenhouse gas emissions by at least 45 percent below 1990 levels by 2020. To achieve these goals, AOSIS and the Group of LDCs are demanding that global emissions peak by 2015, and fall quickly thereafter to ensure that total global emissions are reduced to at least 85 percent below 1990 levels by 2050. This would make it possible to return atmospheric greenhouse gas concentrations to below 350 parts per million of carbon dioxide equivalent. Adverse impacts are already being felt with the current temperature increase of 0.8 degrees Celsius.

FERTILIZERS NEEDED TO BOOST CROP PRODUCTION IN LEAST DEVELOPED COUNTRIES. The increasingly meager levels of crop output by some of the world’s Least Developed Countries has brought awareness to a need for better fertilizer utilization for smallholder farmers, mainly in Africa. Affordability and access have been identified as major qualifiers in the soil infertility prevalent on African farms. Roy Rabindra Nath of the Food and Agriculture Organization’s Plant Production and Protection Division, told The Commitment “it is possible” to make fertilizer affordable for African farmers. “As of now, the farm gate cost is about two to three times higher than the international price of fertilizers. This is mainly due to higher cost of importation in small quantities and internal distribution cost due to inadequate transport infrastructure.” This being the case, the African Fertilizer Financing Mechanism was established, and with it the African Regional Fertilizer Procurement Facility (ARPF).

PROVIDING ACCESS TO SAFE DRINKING WATER IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES. Nearly 1.1 billion people lack access to safe drinking water worldwide, and 4,500 children die everyday from water-related illnesses. The vast majority of those suffering from insufficient or contaminated water live in developing countries. Charity:water, a not-for-profit organization, works to raise awareness of the global water crisis and garner funds to support construction of wells in 15 developing countries in Central America, Africa, and Asia. “We analyze water coverage data, rates of water-related illness, and political stability when determining which countries to focus on,” Christy Scazzerro, communications assistant at charity:water, told The Commitment. Charity:water works with local organizations called “implementing partners,” who already have knowledge and expertise on well construction, to build and repair freshwater wells. Once a well is successfully constructed, charity:water then forms a “water committee” that serves to educate the community on improved hygiene and sanitation, as well as proper maintenance of the wells. The organization also works to ensure that all its projects are sustainable and include the active involvement of the local community.