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THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

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MESSAGE TO THE FOURTH SESSION OF THE  
CONFERENCE OF PARTIES TO THE UNITED NATIONS  
FRAMEWORK CONVENTION ON CLIMATE CHANGE

Delivered on his behalf by Mr. Nitin Desai,  
Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs  
Buenos Aires, 11 November 1998

It gives me great pleasure to convey my warmest greetings to all who have gathered from around the world to continue this historic process. I would like first to express my gratitude to His Excellency President Carlos Menem and the people of Argentina for hosting this conference, which demonstrates yet again their abiding commitment to the United Nations and to human well-being in general. I would also like to salute all the other Heads of State or Government, distinguished delegates, colleagues from the United Nations system and other participants for coming together, in a spirit of partnership, to continue to this vital work, which means so much to the world's people.

Your adoption of the Kyoto Protocol at last year's Conference of the Parties was a landmark event. By agreeing to legally binding targets for emissions, you confirmed your commitment to sustainable development. This is an impressive achievement, and you are to be

congratulated for the hard work and political courage that made it possible.

The Kyoto Protocol is the most far-reaching agreement on environment and sustainable development ever adopted. Drawing on the best available science, and on new concepts in international law and diplomacy such as the precautionary principle, the Protocol offers a new, more sustainable path for industrial economies. Its adoption demonstrates just how far the community of nations has come in accepting responsibility for its shared stewardship of the earth. The next step is to translate this written agreement into reality by signing and ratifying it quickly, so that it enters into force within two or three years.

Here in Buenos Aires, you have launched the post-Kyoto process, a process as significant and challenging as those that produced the Protocol and Convention. Our destination may be agreed, but now you must determine the best way to get us there.

We need to ensure that emission reductions are cost-effective while ensuring that domestic action remains paramount. We must also figure out the best way to transfer climate-friendly technologies to developing countries.

We need much more scientific research, data collection, training and public outreach. And we need to expand and strengthen the Convention's mechanisms for sharing information and reporting on national actions and programmes.

We all know that, despite the agreement at Kyoto, countries still hold differing perspectives on the way forward. I am confident that the political will exists to find common ground and move forward. But just as the Earth Summit set a compelling deadline for the adoption of the Convention, and the Berlin Mandate set a time limit for finalizing the Protocol, so too there must now be a convincing new time-frame for keeping the process on track over the next two or three years. The Kyoto Protocol must start operating as quickly as possible.

Deadlines not only concentrate the minds of governments, they also give essential signals to civil society. If consumers are convinced that the rules of the game are about to change, they will start taking the myriad small decisions that, when added together, can have a major impact on emissions.

Convincing evidence of governments' commitment to move forward quickly will also help to unleash the floodgates of industrial creativity. Experience shows that business responds rapidly and positively to incentives and pressures, from the globalization of markets to financial volatility or unexpected technological revolutions. Indeed, I am convinced that the business sector will develop climate-friendly technologies and services faster than many now believe possible.

The United Nations system will continue to contribute to the economic transformation implied by efforts to reduce greenhouse gases. The Convention secretariat that supports your deliberations and decisions has proven itself an effective partner. The UN Environment Programme and the World Meteorological Organization started us on this road back in 1988 by creating the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change; they too will continue to provide the support you need.

The UN Development Programme is working at the national level to help countries move towards sustainable energy, forestry and agricultural systems. The Global Environment Facility and the World Bank channel financial support to essential projects. UNITAR provides technical training, UNIDO industrial expertise and UNCTAD new ideas on emissions trading. The diversity of mandates and expertise of these and other UN bodies will remain at

your service, and I invite you to provide the necessary guidance to their activities.

We must not underestimate the high stakes of this meeting. The global response to climate change has been impressive but is still in its infancy. Many challenges lie ahead, and success here in Buenos Aires will also contribute to our efforts to protect biodiversity, combat desertification, preserve the ozone layer and alleviate poverty. In that hopeful spirit, I wish you great success with these international deliberations and with your efforts back home in your own countries. Thank you.