

FORMAL STATEMENT BY THE RT HON JOHN PRESCOTT MP, DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER OF THE UNITED KINGDOM: COP6 - 21 NOVEMBER 2000

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Mr President

The sandbag which was placed here yesterday symbolises a lot to people in my country. Two weeks ago, much of my country was under water. In the ancient and Roman City of York, hundreds of people worked through many nights to save it from the worst floods and storms since 1625. York had extensive new flood protection which was tested to the limit where river levels rose over six metres. But it was only the thousands and thousands of these sandbags which saved the City. This was a "wakeup call" that struck home. Since Rio, the scientific argument for climate change has been ignored by many, accompanied by a sometimes sceptical media.

But when people see and experience these ferocious storms, long summer droughts, torrential rains, more extreme and more frequent – they know something is wrong and that climate change now affects them. The people and our press are looking for a successful Hague agreement. But in many other countries the threat is much worse.

Sandbags may prevent a river overflowing. But there are islands and coastal land which cannot be saved from inundation by sandbags. Only an agreement here in the Hague can offer them hope.

My good friend the Minister of Environment for Nigeria told me that his home town has been engulfed not by water but by the spreading desert. Once fertile countryside can no longer support farmers who have lived there for many hundreds of years.

Our task this week is not to re-write the Kyoto Protocol, but to re-affirm it. This Hague agreement must be effective and capable of a consensus for ratification.

Second, it must maintain the environmental integrity of the Kyoto agreement, especially the 5% cut in Annex 1 emissions. "Minus five" may be a small step, but it is a step in the right direction and must not be reversed by an over generous interpretation of the contribution from sinks.

Third, it must be fair, just and equitable. We should avoid the temptation in the name of climate change mechanisms to introduce a new form of economic colonialism. Colonialism may have brought wealth to the few, but it did not bring equity.

Kyoto is only the first step towards a global solution which will include all nations. But Annex 1 developed countries must lead the way. We created the mess, the polluter must pay and individual developed countries must introduce their own policies to cut emissions.

Already the United Kingdom has met its Rio target.

We have published the UK's domestic climate change programme setting out measures for achieving a 23% reduction in our emissions by 2010, well ahead of our Kyoto target.

Our style of living will change. But we believe that we can do this in a way which emphasises gain, not pain. More energy efficient industry, better constructed homes, a better transportation system and renewable energy will all enhance competitiveness and the quality of our lives. But in the long run we must never forget the pain of climate change, if we do nothing.

Mr President the consequences of climate change will make no distinction between countries, rich or poor. Indeed developing countries, who have done the least to cause climate change, are the most vulnerable to catastrophe.

I am aware that many developing countries which I have visited are already limiting their emissions. I have seen some of the work in countries like China, India, and South Africa. So our Hague agreement must secure policies that will cut greenhouse gas emissions and provide a regime for more sustainable development.

There is a justifiable demand for additional funding for adaptation, capacity building and technology transfer. President Chirac and Prime Minister Kok suggest different ways of achieving this. Britain's preference is to use an improved and enhanced Global Environment Facility and I would propose a 50% increase in contributions, with possibly a formula for distribution.

Mr President, climate change is already upon us. But it can get much worse if we fail to act. Unless we join together in agreement this week, we will be throwing away the opportunity of a lifetime. So far, we have all set out our preferred positions and identified our villains. Yes, everyone has a veto, but consensus is needed. Do not let us lose this opportunity of a lifetime under a welter of argument about procedure not substance.

Still there are positive signs behind the scenes of movement towards agreement. We all now need to turn that into an avalanche of support for a good Hague agreement. If we do so, we can then leave the Hague knowing we will leave the planet a better place than the one we inherited, and that when the time came we were not found wanting.