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MESSAGE TO THE NINTH SESSION OF THE CONFERENCE OF THE PARTIES
TO THE UNITED NATIONS FRAMEWORK CONVENTION ON CLIMATE CHANGE
Milan, 10 December 2003

Delivered by Mr. J. A. Ocampo, Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs

For many years now, scientists have warned us about the creeping long-term impacts of ever-increasing emissions of greenhouse gases. By the end of this century, our planet may look very different than it does now, with many small islands gone, the Arctic Ocean free of ice for many months of the year, agricultural regions dramatically altered, and our ecological life-support systems under stress as never before. Developing countries are especially vulnerable. If this forecast comes true, our children and grandchildren will not understand how we allowed this to happen.

Already today, we may well be seeing some of the impacts of climate change. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has concluded that the frequency and magnitude of many extreme climate events increases with a small rise in temperature, and will become even greater at higher temperatures. The heightened frequency and intensity of extreme weather events and associated natural disasters that we have seen in recent years -- such as the serious droughts this summer in India and Europe, and the storms that devastated parts of North America -- is consistent with this conclusion, and there is growing concern that this trend is likely to continue.

Thus there is an urgent for real progress in dealing with the causes and consequences of climate change. I applaud the many nations that have ratified the Kyoto Protocol and are already putting in place measures to meet their commitments even though the Protocol has yet to enter into force. I encourage all remaining Annex I countries that have not joined in this crucial global endeavour to expedite the ratification process. And I welcome the efforts of some non-Annex I countries to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions. Indeed, this issue merits the attention and involvement of all nations.

Non-state actors have also been very active. Many corporate leaders, civil society groups, parliamentarians and local authorities are showing leadership within their spheres of influence. There is increasing impetus behind efforts to research and deploy new, innovative technologies. Such wide-ranging efforts are encouraging, since only concerted action by all involved will enable us to reach the Convention's ultimate objective: "to achieve [...] stabilization of greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system." The Kyoto Protocol is an essential first step in this direction, and its entry into force is of utmost importance. But of course, much more effort will be needed.

This session of the parties to the Convention will also continue the crucial work of assessing vulnerabilities and risks, and considering mitigation and adaptation. As you know, the most serious immediate consequences of global warming will be sea-level rise, negative impacts on human health, loss of productive ecosystems, and possible declines in agricultural productivity. With each passing year, we are committing the planet to an ever higher sea-level -- and thus to the loss of huge tracts of

highly populated and fertile coastal lands that now lie within a few meters of sea-level. We can and must do better in our efforts to minimize such potentially devastating effects of climate change.

More and more people are coming to understand that the mitigation and adaptation to climate change is a vast undertaking that will require a sustained effort for decades to come, and will affect many realms of human endeavour. As we work towards the goals of the Convention and Protocol, we must be equally determined to pursue the Millennium Development Goals -- and fight poverty in a way that will not exacerbate climate change, but will contribute to abating it. As parties to a convention known for bringing all actors together, you have an important contribution to make. Please accept my best wishes for the success of this important meeting.