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THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

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MESSAGE ON WORLD HABITAT DAY 3 October 2005

The theme of this year's World Habitat Day, "The Millennium Development Goals and the City", highlights the importance of managing rapid urbanization and reducing urban poverty.

Recent research shows that by the year 2050, 6 billion people, or two-thirds of humanity, will be living in towns and cities. If present trends continue, more than half of these people could be living in slums. On the other hand, the slums and pockets of poverty that exist even in rich countries are located in well-defined spaces where all the MDGs can be tackled together, where economies of scale can be realized, and where one intervention can have a multiplier effect.

The build-up of slums and informal settlements occurs in large part because of policies and exclusionary practices that deny public services and basic facilities -- including water, sanitation, health and education -- to informal settlements that are deemed illegal. Moreover, community-based efforts to redress such problems often face political and bureaucratic obstacles. But evictions and demolitions are not the answer to the challenges of rapid urbanization. We must have pro-poor, participatory urban development in which women and men are empowered to manage their communities, and where development is carried out with respect for human rights and in accordance with international law.

The lead city for this year's observance of World Habitat Day is Jakarta, chosen to highlight the cooperation that has brought relief to the survivors of last year's tsunami. In Jakarta and Banda Aceh, and in all the Indian Ocean countries hit by that catastrophe, recovery efforts are moving beyond immediate disaster mitigation and humanitarian relief, and are now focused on establishing sound physical and land-use plans and using appropriate building technologies to protect new settlements and people from similar threats in the future. This approach encompasses land and property administration, local governance, institutional development, capacity building and the special needs and concerns of women. Amid the ongoing hardship, there are signs of hope that we can help build new lives and new opportunities.

We need to give the millions of slum dwellers who are suffering from the slow-motion tsunami of rapid urbanization the same chance. On World Habitat Day, I call on the international community and all cities around the world to increase their efforts to reach the Millennium Development Goals, and in particular to the target of achieving a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers by 2020.