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Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
Seminar on Addressing the Adverse Impacts of Climate Change on the Full
Enjoyment of Human Rights
Geneva
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**Opening Remarks by Ms. Barbara Ruis on behalf of Mr. Achim Steiner,
Executive Director, United Nations Environment Programme**

Your Excellencies, Distinguished Participants, Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are here at a moment of reflection and urgent need for all countries to address the sustainability challenges now facing the world's seven billion people.

Let me, first of all, congratulate the Human Rights Council for its vision and leadership in establishing this important seminar, and express my gratitude for inviting UNEP to be part of this joint effort.

This seminar comes at a very important moment. A few months before Rio+20, marking the 20 years after the Earth Summit of 1992 and exactly 40 years after the establishment of UNEP.

At the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment held in Stockholm in 1972, the international community declared "Man has the fundamental right to freedom, equality and adequate conditions of life, in an environment of a quality that permits a life of dignity and well-being, and bears a solemn responsibility to protect and improve the environment for present and future generations".

With time, we have learned that human rights and environmental sustainability are inextricably linked. This is especially true as we face the rising risks of climate change.

We have witnessed that climate change is magnifying the negative effects of environmental degradation on human well-being and the full enjoyment of human rights.

As the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment showed, ecosystem services are indispensable to the well-being of all people in all places.

Ecosystem services are the benefits that people obtain from ecosystems, including food, natural fibers, a steady supply of clean water, regulation of pests and diseases, medicinal substances, recreation, and protection from natural hazards such as floods and droughts.

Links exist in both directions between the flow of ecosystem services and the level of human well-being. The strengthening or weakening of human rights and the strengthening or weakening of the environment can dramatically impact the other.

These linkages can be illustrated at all scales, from local to global; in all places in the world.

However, the effects of environmental degradation do not impact all of us in the same way.

The world's poorest and most vulnerable are more greatly affected by environmental degradation or human rights abuses.

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre have suggested that at least 36 million people were displaced in 2008 due to "sudden-onset natural disasters".

Climate change also challenges food security in several ways - loss of productive land from sea-level rise, destruction of crops and damage to food distribution networks.

Moreover, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has made it very clear that climate change will have impacts on water and that some of the major challenges to adaptation are related to water resources development and management.

In addition, the right to development is at stake due to climate change.

Recent studies have found that up to 12 per cent of the world's GDP is already at risk from existing climate patterns.

Countering climate change does not need to be a hindrance to growing economies. Instead, it is an opportunity for economic growth that generates jobs in clean energy systems, energy efficiency and natural resource management that invests in carbon storage of forests and other ecosystems and fast forwards the clean, green and high-tech industries of the 21st century.

UNEP has termed this transition "the Green Economy." In the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication, it is one of the two main themes of Rio+20 this year.

At Rio+20 we have the opportunity to make sure that the Right to Development is enjoyed by many rather than by few.

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It is widely recognized that a healthy and clean environment is a fundamental prerequisite to the enjoyment of human rights; it elevates the entire spectrum of sustainability, conservation and environmental issues to a place amidst the most fundamental values of society, on a level equal to other human rights.

UNEP is therefore supportive of the suggestion included by the High Commissioner for Human Rights in the recent “Analytical study on the relationship between human rights and the environment” that the Human Rights Council could provide guidance to the international community in regard to the pressing human rights challenges facing humanity in the twenty-first century, including the recognition of a general right to a healthy environment.

Since the Stockholm Declaration, United Nations human rights treaty bodies, regional level treaty bodies, and many states have recognized the link between human rights and environment.

In fact, over 140 national constitutions refer to the right to a healthy environment.

As pointed out by the High Commissioner for Human Rights in her Analytical study, much progress has been made in elucidating the complex and multifaceted relationship between human rights and environment, including climate change. However, the dialogue between the two fields of law and policy has still left a number of questions open.

These questions concern, among others , the need for and the potential content of a right to a healthy environment; the role and duties of private actors with respect to human rights, climate change and the environment; and the operationalization of international human rights obligations as a tool to implement multilateral environmental agreements.

These questions and other pending challenges are the reasons why we are here today.

In this context, UNEP and OHCHR are currently undertaking a joint report on human rights and the environment to better promote integrated strategies and policies for the protection of human rights and the environment.

Our work together is far from over. We must continue to develop our understanding of the relationship between human rights, climate change and the environment at large.

I am sure there will be surprises and detours along the journey we are taking.

But the biggest risk of all is to stand still and exist in the comfort zone of the status quo – I am sure UNEP and OHCHR will not miss this opportunity to work as a team within our UN family and achieve the results the international community is expecting from us.

I wish you all a very successful seminar.