

“Opportunity in Crisis” -- Inaugural lecture of the Geneva Lecture Series, sponsored by the UN Office at Geneva (UNOG) and the UN Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR)

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Mr. Sergei Ordzhonikidze and Mr. Carlos Lopes,
co-conveners of this forum,
Excellencies,
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am grateful to be here with so many friends of the United Nations. I am especially pleased that so many of you are present via the internet. My thanks to the organizers and the media for making this possible. I am deeply impressed by the large turnout of our special guests today. This is by far the largest audience I have ever addressed as Secretary-General, or in my whole life.

We are here today to talk about the most important thing in the world just now: the plight of roughly one billion of the world's poorest people.

We often talk about the problems they face under the rubric of the Millennium Development Goals, our eight-point action plan for alleviating poverty, hunger and disease, and for advancing human wellbeing and social and economic progress. There is no cause more noble.

We have made progress -- in some parts of the world, tremendous progress. Global economic growth has lifted hundreds of millions of people out of poverty. And yet, we face a development emergency.

Worldwide, too many people still go hungry. More than half a million women die, needlessly, in childbirth each year. Some ten million children die every year from preventable diseases, half of them in Africa. This is deplorable and unacceptable.

Now comes another blow, seemingly out of the blue. But it is not totally out of the blue. It was known that we predicted even two-three years ago that this crisis would come. I am sorry that the international community had not listened more attentively. That is the challenge of rising food prices that is a crisis for the most vulnerable populations. It threatens to undo all our good work. If not managed properly, it could touch off a cascade of related crises affecting trade, economic growth, social progress and even political security around the world.

We are familiar with the causes: rising oil prices, growing global demand, bad trade policies, bad weather, panic buying and speculation, the new craze of biofuels derived from food products and so on and so on. We all know the effect on markets: how the price of basic foodstuffs seems to hit new records almost daily, how the price of rice in particular has gone from \$400 a tonne some weeks ago, now \$1000 a tonne. Think of the

impact on ordinary people. Even in Europe and the United States, consumers are grumbling. But imagine the situation of those living on \$1 a day, who might spend two-thirds of their income on food.

In Liberia last week, I heard how people have stopped purchasing imported rice by the bag. Instead, they increasingly buy it by the cup -- because that's all they can afford. It is worth remembering that Liberia's descent into chaos began, in 1979, with food riots.

In Cote d'Ivoire, political leaders told me how they worry about that the crisis in food could create social unrest and undermine their efforts to build real democracy -- at a time when they are so close to success.

In Burkina Faso, the president told me how desperately the nation needs help, where so many people live on simply \$1 a day or less. One senior government official spoke to me especially forcefully. The crisis in food, he said, is a greater threat by far than terrorism. "It makes people doubt their dignity as men," he said. And he added: "The issues of hunger and survival and how to live have become burning issues for the international community."

Ladies and gentlemen, that is why I am here. We are talking about the threat of real hunger.

That is why we must act, with a greater sense of urgency and decisiveness.

Yesterday and today, in Bern, I brought together all the Chief Executive Board of the United Nations -- the heads of agencies, Funds and Programmes and Bretton Woods institutions. There, we agreed on a common strategy which I announced today.

First, we must FEED THE HUNGRY PEOPLE.

Together, we call on the international community to urgently and fully fund the emergency requirements of the World Food Programme. Those requirements currently stand at \$755 million, and they will inevitably grow in the future. Without this emergency relief, we will see a sharp rise in hunger, malnutrition and disease around the globe. We will see increased social tension and economic decline.

Second, we must ensure FOOD FOR TOMORROW.

In Kenya's Rift Valley, the bread basket of East Africa, farmers are planting only a third of what they did last year. Why, when you would think higher prices would prompt them to plant more? Because they cannot afford fertilizer, which is also sky-rocketing in price. This is a prescription for disaster.

Together, we must act, immediately. We must give small farmers the support they need to assure their next harvest. To this end, the FAO Emergency Initiative has called for \$1.7 billion in funding to provide low income countries with seeds, fertilizer and other agricultural inputs required to boost production.

The World Bank is exploring with its Board the creation of a rapid financing facility for grant support to especially fragile, poor countries and quicker, more flexible financing for others.

In Bern, we also agreed that solutions must be scaled to short-term, medium-term and long-term challenges.

For the short-term, we resolved that:

The UN system will cooperate in responding to the crisis, in developing emergency safety nets and providing social protections for the most vulnerable.

The UN system will fully deploy its capacity in the monitoring, quick assessment and analysis of price trends and their impact on vulnerable populations -- with a view toward strengthening the ability of national governments to respond to the crisis.

At the country level, UN Resident Coordinators and humanitarian coordinators, heads of the World Bank missions and country teams will meet urgently to draw up support strategies for national governments and seek international assistance.

For the medium-term:

The UN system will bring together its technical and analytical capabilities to fill research and knowledge gaps in order to support governments with the best information for agricultural decision-making to boost production and productivity.

At our chief executives meeting, we identified areas of urgent action. We call on the international community to immediately take steps to address trade distortions that weigh so heavily on the poorest nations. We call for the drastic reduction of trade subsidies in developed countries during the on-going Doha negotiations.

The CEB calls upon countries that have imposed export restrictions on food that have reduced supplies and contributed to price hikes to urgently reconsider those policies.

Domestic policy measures that correct distortions need to be put in place, together with budget support measures and balance of payments support for the most affected countries.

For the long-term:

We must address the structural and policy issues that contribute to this crisis.

Further research must be undertaken on the impact of diversion of food crops to bio-fuel production and all subsidies to bio-fuels should be reviewed.

We must make special efforts to address the specific needs of Africa. There is no reason that Africa cannot experience a "green revolution," as did Southeast Asia in an earlier era. Most experts agree that African nations can double agricultural production over a

few years, as Malawi has already done. The UN's Africa MDG Steering Group estimates the cost at a relatively modest \$8 to \$10 billion annually.

The World Bank, IMF, Regional Development Banks and UN specialized agencies will collaborate to develop strategies for turning this potential into reality.

To coordinate these efforts, we agreed to immediately establish a high-powered Task Force on the Global Food Crisis, under my leadership. It will bring together the heads of UN agencies, Funds and programmes and Bretton Woods institutions, as well as experts within the UN and leading authorities from the international community. We must marshal our resources and galvanize political will. Forthcoming high-level meetings of the Economic and Social Council, the G-8 Summit meeting and the September High-Level Event of the General Assembly on MDGs, which I am going to chair, all provide opportunities to strengthen our commitment to meeting this global challenge. In this regard, I call on world leaders to make every effort to participate in the High-Level Conference on Food Security, to be held in Rome from 3 to 5 June.

I look forward to meeting with all the world's leaders in Rome to discuss common global strategy to address this issue.

Distinguished guests,

I am confident that we can deal with the global food crisis. We have the resources. We have the knowledge. We know what to do. We should therefore consider this not only as a problem but also as an opportunity.

It is a huge chance to address the root problems of many of the world's poorest people, 70 percent of whom live as small farmers. If we help them -- if we offer aid and the right mix of sound local and international policies -- the solution will come. And along the way we will have struck a mighty blow for social equity and development.

Handled correctly, our solutions to the food crisis will promote the rest of our MDGs. All are closely related.

It is also related to climate change. Climate change wreaks havoc on weather patterns in poor countries. In these States that can least afford to cope with disasters, droughts and floods are causing crop failures and driving up food prices.

This is a principal reason I have personally championed international action against global warming. We now have a roadmap for negotiations to be concluded by 2009. All countries have to step up efforts to meet this goal. The longer it takes to win the battle against global warming, the more difficult and costly it will make MDG implementation.

Higher agricultural productivity will directly support the survival of children, called for in the fourth MDG. It will enable more children to attend school, nourishing them so that they may learn. Remember: women are the farmers of Africa. Helping them empowers them ó advancing yet another Millennium Development Goal.

Travelling through West Africa recently, I saw good reason for optimism. In Burkina Faso, I saw a government working to import drought resistant seeds and better manage scarce water supplies, helped by nations such as Brazil.

In Cote d'Ivoire, we saw a women's cooperative running a chicken farm set up with UN funds. The project generated income -- and food -- for villagers in ways that can easily be replicated. Elsewhere, I saw yet another women's group slowly expanding their local agricultural production, with UN help. Soon they will replace WFP rice with their own home-grown produce, sufficient to cover the needs of their school feeding program.

These are home-grown, grass-roots solutions for grass-roots problems -- precisely the kinds of solutions that Africans need.

Amid the crisis of the day, it would be easy to miss such heartening signs. The fact is that Africa is anything but a lost continent.

African countries are making progress. Burkina Faso, Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda, Niger and Uganda have significantly increased the number of children in primary school. Malawi leads the way in reducing child mortality and raising agricultural productivity. More Africans with HIV/AIDS than ever are receiving anti-retroviral treatment. Niger, Rwanda, Togo and Zambia are controlling malaria by distributing free bednets.

Overall, every single MDG -- with the notable exception of reducing maternal mortality -- will be met in at least one and usually many more African countries. These success stories show how political leadership and sound strategies backed by international support can succeed.

Ladies and gentlemen,

African governments are rising to the challenge in other respects, as well. The continent has been growing faster than any other region in the world -- 6 percent annually. Its stock exchanges are breaking records. Exports are growing vigorously. Macroeconomic indicators such as inflation, fiscal deficit, foreign reserves and internal revenue are at their best since the independence decade of the 1960s.

Visiting a primary school under construction in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, I told the children how I grew up in my country at the time: no walls, no classrooms, I just sat on the bare dirt.

I told them how I knew hunger as a boy -- barely enough to eat, my own grandparents, my parents and other elderly people scavenging for food and infants barely getting enough to grow.

I remember these images, travelling in Africa, and think about that continent's wealth of resources, and the strength and courage of its people, so visible to me in the places I visited. If my country, Korea, could emerge from trauma to become an economic power, I know that Africans can as well.

They need our help -- more than ever, thanks to the food crisis. Donors have to honour their pledges, in line with their commitments at Gleneagles. Beyond that, we must rise to this occasion.

That means acting with generosity and dispatch to deal with a crisis that we, in the rich nations, have largely caused.

To gauge the chances of success, we need to look carefully at what is happening and what can happen in each country. The United Nations and its partners are doing this every day, and the picture is encouraging. We know how to reach the world's shared goals. Now we need the courage to make good on the promises we have made.

Your support is critical. Together, we can answer to the question, "Are the development goals doomed to fail?" with a resounding "No." And there have been many questions raised. Are these MDG goals achievable? My answer is "Yes!", if both developing and developed countries work together.

We can reach these visionary targets for a better world. Together we can turn this crisis into opportunity. I, for one, as Secretary-General of the United Nations, will continue to do everything I can until we do.

Please, join me in this effort, for the sake of all the world's people, now and in the future.

Thank you.