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Opening Plenary

Kaveh Zahedi, Deputy Executive Secretary, ESCAP

- HE General Surasak Karnjanarat, Minister of Natural Resources and Environment of the Royal Kingdom of Thailand
- Mr. Hoesung Lee, Chair, Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)
- Ms. Elena Manaenkova, Deputy Secretary-General WMO
- Mr. Sunday Leonard, representative of UNEP
- Mr. Florin Vladu, representative of UNFCCC
- Mr. Abdalah Mokssit, Secretary IPCC

Distinguished Guest
Ladies and Gentlemen

On behalf of the Executive Secretary, Dr. Akhtar, it gives me great pleasure to welcome you to the United Nations Conference Centre and the home of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific - UNESCAP - and to address the opening plenary of the 44th session of the IPCC.

Having worked in the environment and climate change community for many years, it is a special pleasure for me to welcome so many colleagues and friends to Bangkok.

As you know, you find yourselves in the region that will largely determine the success of the Paris Agreement and the collective ambitions of keeping temperature increase to well below 2 degrees.

In my brief introductory remarks I would like to touch upon 3 issues.

The first is about the relationship between climate change and sustainable development and the opportunity this brings.

As the work of the IPCC has recognized and documented, there is strong inter relationship between sustainable development and climate change. On the one hand, climate change is impacting on the environment, magnifying existing vulnerabilities, and undermining or setting back sustainable development.

On the other hand, our development choices and pathways, consumption and production patterns, are generating the emissions that are causing climate change.

The linkage between climate change and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable development provides us with an opportunity, because Asia Pacific countries have moved from adoption of the 2030 Agenda to its implementation much faster than with the previous Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). There is widespread country ownership of the agenda. This provides an opportunity to fast track climate action, embedding the nationally determined contributions and actions into the mechanisms, processes, and institutions for implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development along with the Sustainable Development Goals.

Of particular concern to the countries of Asia Pacific as they embark on the implementation phase of the 2030 Agenda are tackling poverty and inequality. 1.1 billion people in Asia-Pacific have lifted themselves out of extreme poverty since 1990, but 53 per cent of the world's extreme poor still live in this region, with inequality rising.

The nexus between poverty and climate change means that poorer developing countries, especially rural communities, are most at risk since they are more reliant on agriculture, more vulnerable to coastal and water resource changes, and have less financial, technical and institutional capacity for adaptation. So tackling climate change in Asia Pacific is also about tackling poverty and inequality.

But the concerns about climate change and sustainable development are not confined to the region's rural areas. Our region now accounts for 17 of the world's 28 megacities. Between 1980 and 2010 the region's cities grew by over one billion, a further one billion will be added again by 2040. Our cities can become centres of vulnerability or drivers of change. Cities can drive innovation and transformation. Infrastructure investments in transport and buildings and energy use could achieve both the objectives of the 2030 Agenda and the Paris agreement and create multiple benefits.

And this brings me to my second point: Delivering the SDGs and Paris Agreement will require integrated systems solutions with a focus on co-benefits and a move away from single sector policies and investments.

The Sustainable Development Goals are integrated and indivisible and balance the three dimensions of sustainable development. They require integrated solutions. But more importantly integrated policy solutions can be the bridge between addressing the priorities that dominate short term political timelines – poverty, health, jobs - with longer term sustainable development and climate aspirations.

In Asia, nowhere is integrated policy action more visibly needed than with air pollution. Around seven million premature deaths globally annually are attributed to air pollution – and half of them are happening in Asia and the Pacific region. Integrated approaches and policies dealing with short lived climate pollutants including black carbon or soot for example - through sustainable transport, building efficiencies, energy production and waste management - allow us to combat air pollution and its health burden at the same time as addressing climate mitigation commitments. Similarly we can tackle ozone depletion and climate change simultaneously by avoiding high global warming potential gases such as HFCs – as the encouraging agreement in Kigali has demonstrated.

Integrated solutions to energy – especially sustainable energy for all – are also critical. Between 400 and 600 million in Asia Pacific - depending on the method use - do not have access to electricity. Implementing off grid renewable energy solutions could provide energy access to the poorest along with income generation opportunities and improved children’s education through night time study, at the same time as avoiding increased emissions.

But often these integrated investments are not prioritised because the environmental and social benefits are not captured, the short term rates of return or revenue generation is too low and delivery through multiple sector programmes too complex and costly. Valuing and quantifying the associated co-benefits – which are often specific goals and targets in the SDGs in themselves – would help rebalance actions towards long term investments with higher environmental, social and economic returns.

The third and last issue is about the urgency for action to achieve the Paris Agreement and to keep temperature increase well below 2 degrees.

Asia-Pacific is the world’s most disaster prone region. In the last decade, 400,000 people lost their lives, 1.4 billion were affected, and there was more than half a trillion dollars’ worth of economic damage from disasters. Many

targets of SDGs will not be accomplished in the region, unless we address disaster impacts and reduce vulnerabilities. This includes building the resilience of poor and vulnerable populations to mitigate their exposure and vulnerability to disasters (Goal 1); promoting resilient livelihoods, food production and ecosystems (Goal 2); making human settlements resilient (Goal 11); and strengthening resilience and adaptive capacities to climate-related hazards and natural disasters (Goal 13). Understanding and preparing for the impact of global warming of 1.5 degrees above pre industrial levels will be a vital part of the region's development, especially our vulnerable Pacific Island Countries.

At the same time, more than half of global GHG emissions are from this region and this is set to increase. The latest IEA report highlighted a revolution in the global energy sector, with investments in oil and gas declining by 25 per cent in 2015 while energy produced from renewables rose by more than 30 per cent globally, it also revealed continuing large-scale investments in coal – more than US\$60 billion in 2015 - most of it in Asia including Australia. How fast we decouple the region's economic growth and especially its energy generation from its resource use and pollution will determine the success of GHG pathways that are needed to keep warming below 2 degrees or to stand a chance of 1.5 degrees.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We have always looked to the IPCC for the science that drives climate policy. Now we also look to you to help generate the transformative solutions that will enable to meet the ambitions of the Paris Agreement, and at the same time help deliver on the Sustainable Development Goals.

So I end where I began: progress in Asia Pacific will in large part determine the success of global climate aspirations. So your deliberations are of special importance to this region and the solutions you offer are nowhere needed as much as in this region.

I wish you a successful meeting. Thank you.