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EARTH SUMMIT PRESS RELEASE

UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY TO BEGIN DEBATE ON RIO SUMMIT FOLLOW-UP

Secretary-General Proposes Commission to Keep Agenda 21 Dynamic; Broad Role Seen for NGOs

United Nations
Conference on
Environment and
Development

NEW YORK, 30 October -- The UN General Assembly is set to tackle a formidable task: how to build on the political momentum achieved at the Earth Summit to construct a sustainable future for the planet.

On Monday, 2 November, the Assembly will begin debate on the follow-up to the UN Conference on Environment and Development, the largest-ever gathering of world leaders, held in Rio de Janeiro from 3 to 14 June 1992.

In a just-released report to the Assembly (A/47/598), UN Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali has presented his proposals for follow-up to the Summit. He is expected to open the discussion with a much-awaited speech on how the world body should reorganize its economic and social programmes in line with "the spirit of Rio."

Endorsing recommendations made by Governments in Rio for the setting up of a UN Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) and a High-Level Advisory Body on Sustainable Development, the Secretary-General has proposed that new rules be considered early next year that would permit non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to play an expanded role in the new Commission and advisory group.

The Assembly is expected to adopt without change the three major strategy documents approved at the Earth Summit, after two years of negotiations: Agenda 21 -- a comprehensive blueprint for global action in all areas of sustainable development; the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development -- consisting of 27 principles defining the rights and responsibilities of States in this area; and a set of principles for the sustainable management of forests worldwide.

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UNITED NATIONS

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COMMISSION ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

If the Secretary-General's proposals are adopted, the Commission on Sustainable Development would:

- ▶ hold annual sessions made up of three or four "review segments" to consider: progress in implementing Agenda 21 and relevant legal instruments; information provided by Governments and regional organizations; and ways to finance Agenda 21 programmes and the transfer of environmentally sound technology.
- ▶ incorporate in each session a high-level policy segment, attended by Ministers and policy-makers, who would meet to resolve outstanding issues and give guidance for future work.

Key to the work of the Commission would be to keep Agenda 21 under review and to update it as a result of changing financial, technological, scientific, legal and other developments. Agenda 21 is seen as a dynamic, long-term framework for international action for sustainable development.

The Commission could meet annually for a period of two to three weeks, and could hold meetings inter-sessionally. Some Agenda 21 components could be considered on an annual basis, while others could be reviewed once every two or more years. It is recommended that the Commission also arrange ad hoc inter-sessional working groups to provide in-depth analysis of major issues and prepare recommendations for the segments.

COMMISSION MEMBERSHIP

As a subsidiary body of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), the Commission could range in size from 24 to 53 member countries, to be elected by ECOSOC. In his report, the Secretary-General favours a "limited" membership for the Commission -- without specifying a figure -- to "maximize the prospects for dialogue among high-level participants".

HIGH-LEVEL ADVISORY BOARD

As recommended in Rio, the Secretary-General proposes that a High-Level Advisory Board on Sustainable Development be set up. The group's 15-25 members would be drawn from relevant sciences, industry, finance and other major NGO constituencies, with due account to gender balance. Board members might also take part in the Commission's sessions, especially its high-level policy segment, to provide expert advice.

NGO PARTICIPATION

Recognizing that "participation of NGOs contributed greatly to the success of UNCED," the Secretary-General's report suggests that rules of procedure could be revised to allow enhanced participation by NGOs in the Commission's work. These rules could be approved by ECOSOC at its 1993 Organizational Session, or at an earlier special meeting of the Council formally establishing the Commission.

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Many people who were involved in the Rio Conference feel that broad participation by NGOs is necessary if pressure to act is to be kept on Governments and international bureaucracies, but there is resistance from some Governments and long-established NGOs.

The Secretary-General also proposes that informal arrangements be made so organizations representing women, business and the scientific community, for example, can participate in the inter-sessional work of the Commission.

COORDINATION OF UN AGENCIES

Virtually every agency and programme of the UN system will be involved in the implementation of Agenda 21. To make sure these efforts are complementary and not redundant, the Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC) decided at its session on 20-21 October to establish an Inter-Agency Committee on Sustainable Development (IACSD). As outlined in the Secretary-General's report, the IACSD will allocate responsibilities for implementing Agenda 21 and monitor financing needs created by new UN system programmes.

The Inter-Agency Committee will be composed initially of senior officials from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN, the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, the World Health Organization, the World Bank, the World Meteorological Organization, the UN Development Programme, the UN Environment Programme, the International Labour Organisation and the International Atomic Energy Agency.

SECRETARIAT SUPPORT

The specific place within the UN structure of the support secretariat for the Commission on Sustainable Development and follow-up to UNCED will be proposed later in the Assembly's session, according to the Secretary-General's report. These arrangements are being negotiated by Governments as part of a comprehensive review of the UN's economic and social sectors.

Also to be proposed later will be the geographical location of the secretariat; New York and Geneva are the favoured options.

SCHEDULE OF WORK

Initial debate on the follow-up to the Rio Conference will take place in the Plenary of the General Assembly from 2 to 4 November. Negotiations will then continue in the Assembly's Second (Economic) Committee, which is expected to set up a special working group to be chaired by Ambassador Ismail Razali of Malaysia. It is likely that negotiations will go on, often behind closed doors, for at least a month, and the Assembly will make its final decisions near the close of its session in mid-December.

For further information, contact:
Julie Thompson or Pragati Pascale
UNCED Information Programme, Room S-894
UN Department of Public Information
Tel: (212) 963-4295/6870/7704
Fax: (212) 963-4556