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THE PRESIDENT OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

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Statement of H.E. Mr. Vuk Jeremić,
President of the 67th Session of the General Assembly,
at the Opening of the Thematic Debate "Sustainable Development and Climate Change: Practical Solutions in the Energy-Water Nexus"

Mr. Under-Secretary-General,
Minister of State Al Jaber,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Representatives,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am honored to welcome you to the General Assembly's thematic debate on Sustainable Development and Climate Change: Practical Solutions in the Energy-Water Nexus."

This has been pulled together with the great help of His Excellency Dr. Sultan Ahmed Al Jaber Minister of State and Special Envoy for Energy and Climate Change of the United Arab Emirates. I am profoundly grateful for his engagement and dedication.

I would like to extend special recognition to Professor Jeffrey Sachs of Columbia University the Secretary-General's Special Adviser on the MDGs, and Director of the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network, and acknowledge his incessant efforts to help the world overcome the threats posed by climate change.

Allow me also to express my deep appreciation to Ambassador Wu Hongbo, the UN's Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs, for his hard work and strong commitment to promoting the UN's post-2015 agenda.

Finally, let me thank the renowned experts, practitioners, and businessmen who will anchor the mid-morning 'views from the frontline' part of the debate, as well as those who will participate in the afternoon panel discussions.

Excellencies,

Last June in Rio, world leaders endorsed the historic "Future We Want" document, which established the framing principles of the post-2015 agenda. For the first time, Member States agreed on measures to comprehensively integrate the three dimensions of sustainable development namely economic, social, and environmental into a single, fully coherent whole.

They mandated the General Assembly to conceive and adopt the SDGs, design options for financing them, and create a workable intergovernmental arrangement for monitoring their implementation in

essence, assigning this body with the strategic aim of crafting a new, ambitious global framework that will define much of the UN's work for decades to come.

The Rio+20 document also tasked the General Assembly to "further integrate sustainable development as a key element of the overarching framework for United Nations activities, and adequately address sustainable development in its agenda-setting, including through periodic high-level [events]," such as thematic debates.

Excellencies,

The fundamental challenge of our time is to end extreme poverty in this generation and significantly narrow the global gap between rich and poor, without ruining the environmental basis for our survival.

The latest scientific announcements have confirmed some of the worst fears. It has been determined that the level of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere has risen above 400 parts per million for the first time in more than three million years.

To safeguard the world from runaway climate change, we will need to de-couple economic growth from our dependence on carbon-based energy systems, which currently provide 80 percent of our primary power needs. Last year, burning these types of fuels led to another 34 billion tons of CO2 being emitted in the air. As the concentration of CO2 keeps increasing, the Earth's ecosystems will continue to change with perilous rapidity.

The evidence is overwhelming: global temperatures are rising and extreme weather events are becoming commonplace. Some parts of the globe are experiencing more drought; others more floods. The amount of freshwater is decreasing, as rivers and aquifers dry up.

Our water problems are closely linked to our energy problems. Water supply requires large amounts of power, whether for pumping, treatment, or desalination. Similarly, energy supplies often critically depend on water for hydroelectricity, cooling, or irrigation for biomass.

Food production and distribution also necessitate large inputs of both energy and water indeed, even temporary interruptions of either have caused major food crises in many parts of the world.

Excellencies,

The challenge to secure every Member State's right to sustainable development has four inter-related dimensions: technological, organizational, economic, and moral.

Each of them is applicable to energy-water nexus.

We need more energy, not less, to end poverty and raise global living standards. But that power must be low carbon, if we are to remain within planetary boundaries. New technologies are required in order

to remake the energy delivery system so that by mid-century, they produce perhaps three times today's output, but with less than half of the emissions.

Recent advancements are encouraging. The price of solar power has fallen by a factor of 100 in just 40 years; today's poor desert regions can become tomorrow's energy powerhouses. The cost of wind power is now at "grid parity" in many parts of the world, meaning that it can already compete with fossil fuels. There are other potential alternatives as well, such as fourth-generation nuclear power, carbon capture and sequestration, and advanced biofuels just to name a few.

Smarter technologies are also making water usage more efficient, allowing us to get more benefit per liter "more crop per drop," as Professor Sachs recently put it. New farm techniques will allow for much more precision in irrigation; new seed varieties will be better suited to drier conditions; new ways to recycle urban water use will ensure municipal needs; and new technologies can be deployed to ensure safe drinking water and sanitation for the poor.

Excellencies,

The challenges go beyond technology they are also organizational. How can humanity establish and then manage a sustained de-carbonization effort that will necessitate two generations to complete, and require the consent and participation of all nations? Responsibility for this unprecedented task has been put in the hands of the General Assembly, charged with defining the major workstreams of the post-2015 agenda. These include, most notably, the Open Working Group on SDGs, and the Intergovernmental Process to Propose Options for an Effective Sustainable Development Financing Strategy.

The third dimension of the challenge is economic. We must have better functioning energy markets, if we'd like to benefit from the dynamism and innovation of the private sector. Similarly, we must give proper incentives to rationalize water use, while protecting the poor. At present, our markets do not function well enough in this regard. The competition of high-carbon and low-carbon energy is not yet balanced, because fossil fuel prices do not include the social costs of climate change. With the right market incentives, however, the shift to low-carbon energy systems may become both faster and deeper.

The final challenge is a moral one. Stewardship of the environment is our shared obligation. We hold in our hands the power to ruin the Earth, or to sustain it for posterity. This is an unprecedented responsibility. Our generation is the first to bear it, as only it became capacious enough both economically and demographically to threaten the entire planet.

Excellencies,

We cannot afford business as usual for growth along the current path will lead us to catastrophe, not riches.

We need to embrace the path to sustainability, crafting a new global partnership in which no nation is left behind, and no country opts out.

This calls for a new direction and new strategies. I believe this debate can be an important step in moving us closer to the post-2015 starting line, by directing our attention to the innovative science, cutting-edge technologies, and new business models related to the energy-water nexus.

Today, the General Assembly will have the opportunity to benefit from the wisdom of some of the world's leading experts in the field. We hope that their insights will help us to make more informed choices in the critical years ahead for the extent of the damage we are causing is fast approaching the point of no return.

We have the tools to save the planet from human-induced environmental devastation. What we lack, however, is a fundamental commitment to use them in coherent ways, as well as a full appreciation of how little time we have left before it gets too late.

The stark truth is that we face an existential challenge like never before and we're simply not doing enough to address it.

Thank you for your attention.