

Message

from

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The United Nations Human Settlements Programme

(to be read by the Director of ROAP)

Opening of the First Asia-Pacific Contest

for Women-friendly Cities

March 8, 2004, Fukuoka, Japan (5 minutes)

Honorable Mayors, Distinguished Participants, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to begin by congratulating the three award winning cities in the First Asia-Pacific Contest for Women-friendly Cities. I would like to offer my apologies for not being able to join you today. My best wishes go to all those present.

It is no accident that this contest is held on Monday the 8th of March, for today is the day we celebrate Women's Day; the day we commemorate the historic struggle for women's equality and pay heed to how we let gender affect our daily lives, our homes... and our cities. Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women is one of the Millennium Development Goals adopted by the international community. We, at UN-Habitat, aim to achieve this goal within the context of improving urban governance in cities around the world, and securing tenure for millions of people – including women – with a particular focus on the world's slums.

Cities in the Asia-Pacific region continue to grow rapidly. Asia's urban population is expected to double by 2020. I am sure today's award winners will agree with me when I say that the high rates of growth in cities in the developing world make the problems faced by urban populations much more pressing. In developing countries, urbanization is often accompanied by increases in inequality, threats to human security and proliferation of slums, which are characterized by poor sanitation, limited access to clean and safe drinking water, poor health condition and illiteracy, inadequate housing, lack of job opportunities which together result in a vicious cycle of increasing poverty. What is more, the impact of this situation is disproportionately affects the lives of women. Therefore, any programmes that aim to tackle urban poverty must address

needs of women.

Having recognized the importance of addressing the problems of urbanization and gender, what shall our strategy be? There are several approaches. First, by allowing women to articulate their needs and express their views on how those needs should be addressed is a practice that will empower the community as a whole and enrich our cities and towns. Second, we need to institutionalize good practice, *ad hoc* initiatives and “movements” within a framework of good governance so that improvements continuously occur. Third, it is also important that women not only participate in planning and implementation of social and economic activities but also equally participate in the decision making, so that policies reflect their perspectives and voices. Lastly, we need to monitor how we have progressed and if need be, adjust the direction in which we are moving. For this to happen, we need to shepherd and manage the knowledge we have in these fields and continuously and patiently advocate for a change for the better.

By hosting this first Contest for Women-friendly Cities in the region, jointly with UNIFEM, UN-HABITAT, has provided a forum, which recognizes the important progress today’s award-winning cities have made. We hope their successes such as institutionalizing gender responsive mechanisms, gender budgeting, and implementing legislative change in partnership with civil society, will inspire other cities to do the same.

In closing, I wish to express my thanks to our local hosts, the Fukuoka Prefectural Women’s Centre (Asubaru), the Fukuoka Women’s Centre (Amikas), Kitakyushu Forum on Asian Women (KFAW) as well as the support provided by the Government of Japan, Fukuoka Prefectural Government and Fukuoka City and our partner organizations who have made today’s event possible.

Hopefully, today’s contest will cause those working for women-friendly cities throughout the Asia-Pacific region to take heart, while inspiring others to begin thinking about the steps needed to make cities more women-friendly. Tomorrow’s Expert Group Meeting will further discuss what those steps might be and how they might best be taken forward. Through the benefit of these discussions, UN-HABITAT and our partner organizations can continue our work of improving the lives of peoples in cities and towns.

Thank you very much.