The Secretary-General's message on the occasion of World Habitat Day

2 October 2006

By the year 2050, some 6 billion people representing two-thirds of humanity will be living in towns and cities. Never before in history has the world witnessed such rapid urbanization. Neither has it witnessed such a swift rise in the absolute numbers of people migrating. The two phenomena -- migration and urban growth -- are strongly linked, mainly because the majority of people on the move go for the bright lights of the city.

As we reflect on the theme of this year’s observance of World Habitat Day – “Cities, magnets of hope” -- we must also bear in mind that cities can also be places of considerable despair. Never before has the world witnessed such a large proliferation of urban slums. Today, 1 billion people, or 1 of every 3 urban dwellers, live in slums. If municipalities and governments fail to manage urban growth and migration sustainably, this number is expected to double in the next 30 years.

Almost everywhere, cities are the destinations for people escaping poverty, conflict and human rights violations, or simply those looking for ways to build better lives. While many migrants head to the North, South-South migration also presents tremendous challenges. Major cities such as Dakar, Jakarta, Johannesburg or Rio de Janeiro, to cite just a few examples, are having trouble accommodating new migrants when so many long-standing citizens are already struggling.

These and other challenges came into sharp focus at third session of the World Urban Forum held in Vancouver, Canada in June 2006. That meeting made it clear that UN Member States, along with non-governmental organizations, the private sector and citizens all over the world, need to galvanize their strength as never before in the quest for sustainable urbanization and inclusive cities. On World Habitat Day, I urge all involved to work in partnership to manage one of the key challenges confronting humanity in the 21st century.