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***From Conflict to Peacebuilding:
The Role of Natural Resources and the Environment (Report Launch)***

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Edited Transcript—Achim Steiner

It's once again a great pleasure to be here, to be here with Dan and also with my colleagues from our conflicts and disasters branch, who, as you will see with Andrew just now, have been working on these issues in a broader community for quite a while. But why we were keen to present this report to you here is, it is something that I don't say because UNEP obviously was a key player in the production of this report. I find the summary that this report has put together on both the key issues, some of the historical trends and patterns that we have observed and the agenda on what we need to work on, one of the more succinct, and actionable pieces of analysis, but also policy-relevant material that I have written, read for a while. And we, in fact, just had a workshop in Nairobi just a couple of weeks ago on environment and conflict and also the issue of peace-keeping.

Two reasons why I was also very keen to be here, with you tonight: One is I think related to the fact that this sort of work signals what the United Nations' environmental program in at least one respect is all about. We are first and foremost the environmental program of the United Nations. Our role is to try within the U.N. family to look at issues of environment, natural resources, sustainability, and think about ways in which, under the mandates of a very wide range of institutions in the U.N. and the multi-lateral system, these issues can become part of the regular work. And it is particularly gratifying to see the cooperation between UNEP on the one hand and a circle of experts that extends into, you have mentioned, IUCN now, this report was in part workshopped at the IUCN World Conservation Congress in the context of NATO in cooperation with the peace-building commission in the United Nations with a number of experts from around the world.

We have seen, I think here in the example of what it is to bring the scientific and also empirical evidence on environment, conflict, and peace-keeping, essentially into the domain of the peace-keeping world, which needs to think about these issues from a number of angles that perhaps are different from the past.



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The second reason why I'm very keen to move this report into, let's say, more of a focused debate is that it is part of what UNEP at the moment is trying to help shape in terms of a discourse. The environmental agenda for a very long time has in essence been problem-focused. Our role has been to identify problems, to show where the blind spots of societies and economic policies are, to cover environmental destruction and degradation, to be, if you want, a wakeup call to the international community on what is going on in the environment. And that work, I think will never cease, and it is a critical part of empowering first-world public debate and secondly, also, policy action and responses in our societies. But I think for perhaps too long, partly out of our own making, but also because it suits the image of the environmental agenda, we are also associated with problems, constraints, scenarios of doomsday rather than actually being solution-providers, opportunity creators, problem-solvers in that sense.

And you may be aware that in the last few weeks UNEP has been putting a lot of work into trying to shape a discourse and a debate in our nations, in our communities on the financial crisis and the environmental agenda. It's something that here in Washington, and with the new administration, is not exactly unusual, because you are in the midst of that very debate, but we have taken this idea of the financial crisis, the economic crisis and the environmental imperatives to act, very much into a global context have shaped the debate here on this notion of a global green new deal. And in essence providing in a moment of, you know, disruption, frustration, destabilization and the economic problems, a perspective that, in fact, if you take the environmental agenda and you link economy to environment, you become also a part of the solution. In fact you become a critical part, we believe, of dealing with the economic recession from a different and transformative point of view.

And in addressing the issue of environment natural resources, conflict, peace-keeping, I think we actually can provide a critical set of building blocks that would allow us to be not just lamenters of the sidelines as we often have been over the last couple of decades as we have watched civil strife, civil wars, wars between countries result in massive human suffering, human misery, but also massive environmental degradation, destruction and essentially foreclosing opportunities for communities to recover from conflict, because the very resource base they need to draw on has either been severely impacted or even destroyed.

What the report seeks to do is in a sense provide both a historical perspective from the viewpoint of what kind of transcendent patterns can be discerned from what we have observed when environmental issues, natural resource issues have found themselves at the



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center of conflicts or wars or civil strife, and what the report does lay out, if you want almost a framework from the standing, what is often a very diverse set of circumstances. No war, no conflict, no resource consolation is ever the same. But there are, I think, in the reports some very interesting patterns that are put before us to think about can we get beyond the point where environment and conflict always has to be a story of tragedy with no happy ending?

The three pathways of the report does look at is from the point of view of how do environment and national resource issues one, contribute and drive conflict, because increasingly in our world that is going to be an issue that we are confronted with. It is not just a phenomenon of destruction as a impact as a almost side-event to a core conflict, in fact, natural resource issues, environmental change and the consequences it imposes on local communities, nation states, trans-boundary issues is increasingly going to be a contributing factor and a driver.

Secondly, as we have seen more and more in recent decades, natural resources become, also, a financing vehicle for conflict. Sustaining conflict well beyond the point where conflict has its origin, to actually having become part of a war economy, a conflict economy, and therefore extending conflicts well beyond the point where they have traditionally would have seized either because people, you know, would have made the point they were trying to make or they would have gained control over a resource, and what we see in DRC, what we saw for a long time in Angola and many other parts of the world is that natural resources and environmental assets become part of continuing and continuing to sustain conflicts.

A third part where the report identifies -- and I think it's one that we have paid far too little attention to is that very often these issues can also undermine peace-keeping efforts, and in fact where a political agreement may be reached, the temptation, partly because some people will lose control over resources or they may want to revert after the signing of a peace agreement to a situation during the conflict that in a number of cases -- and the report lays this out very clearly -- a so called relapse phenomenon has become quite common. And if you do not understand how environment and natural resources can undermine very volatile peace agreements and let's say conflict resolution strategies, we actually risk within a year or two or three very often to find ourselves back where we started off from.

The other part of the analytical framework that the report provides is looking a little bit also the impact, the nature of the impact. There are direct impacts and indirect impacts and institutional impacts that the report describes and also provides if you want as a framework



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for trying to understand how we would be able to either avoid, minimize or even prevent some of these impacts from occurring. Now I won't go into detail because Andrew will provide some very live examples of that in a minute.

If we look at the issue of conflict and environment, both from a historical perspective and a scenario perspective, then clearly what the report does show as is that we have a growing number of conflicts over time and certainly a significant number that this report has captured where the linkage between the two, natural resources and let's say growing tension between communities or countries, has become a phenomenon that we have to understand, not as something that is singular, but in fact there is a pattern. There's a trend, and that trend, if anything, is worrying, because it is not one that is declining, it is increasing.

Secondly, that leads us also to -- this is not so much in the report, but we at UNEP are working increasingly under pressure of what scenarios do we discern from a perspective in the future. One indicator of how serious the member states now take this issue is that we have in our new medium-term strategies, six major areas in which UNEP is meant to provide key services to the member states, to the international community, and for the first time conflict and disasters have become one of the six areas, and this is as surprising to me as it was, I think, to many because less than, what was it? Eight, nine years ago, UNEP did not even work on these issues, it worked in terms of assessment, maybe had intervention then selected phases, but it was only after the previous executive director that conflict and disasters unit and our collaboration with other parts of the U.N. system began to emerge and literally within six years, the international community has elevated these issues to one of the six major areas in which this institution is meant to work. I think that provides you with one indicator of this.

The second indicator, I think is simply one where we need to look at the plethora of reports that are out there, now. Whether his intent of increasing populations, whether it is in terms of resource scarcity scenarios, we just have the world water forum happening in Istanbul. We can look at soils, we can look at biodiversity, we can look at fisheries, we can look at timber, we can look at virtually any kind of resource that is at the moment subject to extracted mining practices rather than sustainable harvesting and sustainable use.

After that, also, resource economics that with scarcity comes a kind of rent-seeking behavior, or those that have access and control over resources and overlay all of that with climate change global warming and the disruptive nature of the impacts that we are now beginning to



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see, not only in terms of scenarios but unfolding on the scale and on the pace that is putting us already at the top end of the IPCC scenarios, and it does not take a lot of imagination to see why looking at environment natural resources and the potential for society under stress to essentially escalate into conflict and competition is not just some doomsday scenario, it is a very real prospect, which is not -- and I emphasize this -- declaring the world on an inevitable path to a third world war over water, I think what we are faced with is the challenge of being able to organize ourselves as societies and as international community to avoid being lead down that path by events and by circumstance.

And that's where the six points that the report lays out and I'll leave it to Andrew in a moment to spell them out, but it ranges from early warning and early action to issues of oversight and protection of resources during conflict. Remember the financing of conflict issues. Addressing natural resources and environment as part of peace-making and peace-keeping, and I think this is a critical message, we underestimate the extent to which these issues can, in fact, become a part of peace-building and peace-making and include in there also in the peace-building strategies that we apply, and this is not just the U.N. and its peace-keeping operations, it is the way that we engage conflicting parties and look at the opportunities for developing shared agendas and common interests in a peace-building phase.

Harness natural resources for economic recovery, in Africa very often the ability to demobilize troops to redeploy them into investing in the re-establishment and restoration of natural resources. Afforestation, ecosystem restoration, has often been underestimated and I think one of the missed opportunities of getting to that very critical phase of what do you do with people who know nothing but war and are now expected to become civilians overnight when most of the country cannot provide even the basic infrastructure or support services. And capitalize on the potential for environmental cooperation to contribute to this building. Particularly in trans-boundary context I think we have a lot to learn here.

Let me end by just saying that we take this report not only extremely seriously but, in fact, as a basis upon which UNEP can engage with a whole series of actors, reaching to the military establishments, reaching into political arenas that previously, perhaps, viewed these issues as extraneous to the kind of expertise and empirical evidence that we can provide, and I'm delighted to say, after my meetings yesterday in New York with Allan, the, you know, the under-secretary general for peace-keeping, we are now proposing to bring the expertise right into the peace-keeping operation itself by looking at the opportunity of starting with three to four countries where we will put -- green advisors, so to speak, with blue helmets making, in



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a sense, the peace-keeping operation itself more environmentally sensitive, just from a direct impact point of view, providing the kind of expertise that will allow a peace-keeping operation to inform that only its own footprint, but in fact the opportunities for peace-building through looking at opportunities from an environmental natural-resource-restoration point of view. And thirdly to draw on the real expertise that peace-keeping provides us with understanding, how do you minimize the potential for conflicts to escalate again and to revert into a conflict situation?

So these are just a few examples of just how we are working on this and from Andrew you will also hear that in UNEP itself over the years, we have developed a whole body of empirical evidence and expertise and knowledge for having worked from Kosovo to Afghanistan to Iraq, now DRC, the Gaza and West Bank situations as well as an increasingly complex set of experiences that have let us to bring this kind of work in partnership with a number of other actors right to the international policy arena where I think it is now right for some significant reflection and action. Thank you very much.



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