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Message of the UN Secretary-General, Mr. Kofi Annan
Delivered on His Behalf by Mr. Rubens Ricupero
Secretary-General of UNCTAD

The outcome of your Conference can be decisive for the future of the multilateral trading system, for the world economy as a whole, and therefore for the hopes of many millions of human beings.

The world economy is now growing at the slowest pace in a decade, and the risk of global recession is rising. The impact on the world's poorer nations will be devastating. Already their efforts to reduce poverty are hampered by lower commodity prices, weakening exports, declining foreign investment, and in many cases violent conflict. The World Bank estimates that, because of the slowdown, as many as 15 million more people could find themselves living in poverty in 2002. Up to five million of these are likely to be in Africa.

To halt and reverse this trend, we must restore market confidence, create new export opportunities, and resume growth. Now, more than ever, we need to resist the siren voices of protectionism, and work out multilateral solutions to our problems.

Trade can be a key engine for growth. Therefore, a commitment to continue to open markets is even more important for developing countries and transition economies than for the rest of the world. That is why, in the past decade, many of them have unilaterally liberalized their trade policies, without waiting for reciprocity. Yet fully open markets remain a distant goal. Agricultural trade, especially, is distorted by subsidies, on which OECD countries spend more than US\$300 billion a year – a sum approximately equal to the entire gross domestic product of Sub-Saharan Africa.

The new round of negotiations you are about to launch must be a "development round" in more than name. It must address the central concerns of the developing countries, and strengthen their competitive position. I would urge negotiators to ask themselves, at every step in the road, "How can we resolve this problem in a way that will enable countries to develop, and enable people to escape from poverty?"

Eliminating trade barriers is a necessary condition for this to happen, but not a sufficient one. It is equally important that developing countries achieve the technological, social and economic capacity to take advantage of market opportunities. They need to invest in education, in infrastructure and in institutions. The international community can, and must, help them to do so.

In one respect at least, the timing of your Conference is highly auspicious: it coincides with the successful conclusion of negotiations on the accession of China – an event of historic proportions for the world trading system. Some 30 more developing countries and economies in transition are eager to join. I hope they will soon be able to do so, and that the decisions on their applications will be made through a transparent and inclusive process.

I also welcome the strengthened cooperation between the WTO and the United Nations. This has been especially reflected in the preparations for the International Conference on Financing for Development, to be held in Monterrey, Mexico, next March. These preparations have involved closer cooperation than ever before among member States, the UN system, the Bretton Woods Institutions and the WTO. I encourage you to keep up this spirit of creative partnership, particularly in your efforts to ensure that developing countries receive the technical assistance they need in the negotiating process. For our part, we at the United Nations are committed to continuing to provide such assistance through UNCTAD and our Regional Commissions, with the help of the UN Development Programme.

After the tragic events of 11 September, the world faces two possible futures: a mutually destructive clash of so-called "civilizations" turning in upon themselves, or a global economy rooted in universal values. The latter must be our choice – but it can only be achieved if the global market is genuinely open to all, and offers real hope to those currently trapped in poverty.

If ever there was a time when broad agreement on the rules of the international trading system was vitally needed, among nations rich and poor, that time is now.
