

**Speech of Mr Kofi Annan, General-Secretary of the United Nations, during the 97th Meeting of the Association of American Geographers**

Letter by Prof. Anne Buttner, President, International Geographical Union, to Mr Kofi Annan

reply by Mr Kofi Annan to Prof. Anne Buttner

Mr Kofi Annan

New York, March 1st, 2001 — In the framework of the 97th Annual Meeting of the Association of American Geographers, Mr Kofi Annan, Secretary-General of the United Nations, addressed the following speech to the participants:

**Following is the text of an address made today by the Secretary-General to the Association of American Geographers:**

Thank you for that warm welcome. And thank you, Miklos [Pinther], for those very kind words of introduction. I remember well the way we pored over maps last summer during that difficult operation along the Israel-Lebanon border. I can assure you that the moment you just described was tense for all of us.

That experience showed me yet again the crucial role that cartographers and geographers play in the work of the United Nations. Indeed, often I find myself saying, "Show me the maps."

Peacekeepers need to know the terrain, and where landmines might be hidden. Health workers fanning out to vaccinate children need to know the distribution of the population. Environmental experts need to know if resources are under pressure from settlement patterns or other threats. And as we speak, the United Nations is preparing to demarcate the disputed border between Eritrea and Ethiopia as part of the peace settlement between those two countries.

We hear a lot about blue helmets and relief workers out there in the world's war-zones and disaster areas, but we should not forget that geographers are on the front lines, too.

So I was very eager to meet you all today. The United Nations and the community of professional geographers have a great deal in common. Borders figure heavily in our work. So does science. Most of all, geographers routinely fill in the blanks of terra incognita, enabling people to update their views of the earth and its inhabitants. The United Nations also tries to get people to see the world in new ways.

I would like to suggest to you today that we take advantage of this close affinity, and work together to tackle some of the gravest challenges facing the human community: Climate change, the perilous state of the global environment and the long-term goal of achieving truly sustainable development.

As you know only too well, the signs of severe environmental distress are all around us. Unsustainable practices are woven deeply into the fabric of modern life. Land degradation threatens food security. Forest destruction threatens biodiversity. Water pollution threatens public health, and fierce competition for fresh water may well become a source of conflict and wars in the future. Environmental concerns are the national security issues of the future.

The most recent findings of the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change only add to the discomfort. The Panel finds the evidence that human activities are responsible for destabilizing the global climate stronger than ever, and warns of significant, adverse consequences if we do not do something serious about it very soon.

The Panel's report also helps lay to rest a myth about global warming -- the myth that

the evidence remains too uncertain to serve as a basis for major political or economic decisions. Yes, uncertainties exist; there will always be dissenting voices and a need for more research. That is the nature of scientific inquiry. But the overwhelming majority of scientific experts have concluded that climate change is occurring, that humans are contributing, and that we cannot wait any longer to take action. And they are warning us that environmental problems build up over time, and take an equally long time to remedy.

Another harmful myth is that we face a choice between economy and ecology.

Environmental protection is often seen as an extra burden. But true environmental costs are rarely reflected in national accounts, and the costs of inaction are often ignored when strategic decisions are taken.

It is said that environmental action is a luxury, which only rich countries can afford. But all countries depend on resources and other environmental capital.

And it is said that environmental conservation is a constraint on economic growth, or even an alternative to it. But economists now broadly agree that improved energy efficiency and other "no regrets" strategies could bring great benefits at no cost. In fact, the opposite is true: without conservation, economic growth cannot be sustained.

We must stop being so economically defensive, and start being more politically courageous.

Too often, governments still behave as if the environment were a realm unto itself, distinct from issues of poverty, population and energy and the development process in general. Such thinking is out of date. Environmental issues should now be at the centre of the policy-making process, fully integrated into mainstream economic and social policy. This understanding that development needs to be sustainable was the conceptual breakthrough of the Earth Summit in 1992 and that summit really was a breakthrough. In the years since then, however, we have too often gone on with business as usual.

The response to global warming is a partial exception. The Convention adopted at the Earth Summit, and the process since then surrounding the Kyoto Protocol, aim to bring about a new pattern of energy consumption that will reduce emissions of dangerous greenhouse gases, and so put our economies on a more sustainable footing. The effort is similar to the one which, since the Second World War, has built the architecture of the world trading regime.

Considerable progress has been made in negotiations to fill in the Protocol's fine print. But it has yet to enter into force, and negotiations continue on emissions trading, carbon "sinks" and mechanisms for climate-friendly investments in developing countries. The failure to reach agreement on these and other key issues at talks in The Hague last November was disappointing. But the talks will resume in Bonn on 16 July, and I very much hope that governments will then be able to bridge the gaps between them and arrive at a protocol that can be ratified.

To abandon this process now would set back the global climate strategy for many years. And it would leave developing countries -- who will suffer most from the impact of climate change even though they are the least responsible for it -- that much farther behind. The burden of leadership falls on the industrialized countries. They are responsible for most of the world's present carbon emissions, and they are best placed, both economically and technologically, to adopt new patterns of production and consumption.

Kyoto is focused, to a large extent, on mitigating the burden of decades of unsustainable practices. But it is also an attempt at fundamental change. Similar efforts are needed far beyond the question of global warming. I am talking here about the implementation of related agreements on biodiversity, desertification and ozone -- depletion. I am talking about the struggle to eradicate poverty. And I am talking about changes in consumer habits and day-to-day behaviour. We private citizens should not always wait for governments and industry to act. We have power, through our choices

and our purchases. And we can affect the patterns of consumption and also influence decisions of companies by exercising those choices.

This is undoubtedly a broad and ambitious agenda. The United Nations system will continue to play its diverse role in pushing it along.

For my part, I have engaged many of the world's leading transitional companies in a "global compact" aimed at promoting greater environmental responsibility. Insurance companies, as you can imagine, are particularly concerned at the prospect of global warming and have been a significant voice calling for greater attention to this challenge. A few enterprising corporate leaders are already seizing the opportunity to use and develop green technology and renewable resources, and I hope their example will be widely emulated. Governments can help push this evolution along through creative use of tax and fiscal policies, including by eliminating the enormous subsidies that continue to support a range of harmful and unsustainable practices.

The United Nations has also begun work to ensure the best possible outcome of the World Summit on Sustainable Development, to be held next year in Johannesburg. Tremendous anxieties have accompanied the process of globalization and the technological progress that is one of globalization's main engines -- including fears that the environment may be one of the main casualties. World leaders must respond to those concerns. They must show that they take the idea of stewardship seriously. There is an African proverb that says: "The earth is not ours, it is a treasure we hold in trust for our children and their children." And I hope my generation and yours will be worthy of this trust. Sustainable development will not happen of its own accord. The Summit must provide a decisive push. We have a lot of work to do if it is to have the same kind of impact as the Earth Summit did nearly a decade ago.

I see four areas in particular where geographers can make a special contribution to this effort.

First is education. Geography class is one of the first places where young people come into contact with the world beyond their immediate community. I urge you to use that platform to convey a message, not only about the carbon cycle and the wonders of our physical world, but also about political life. Please tell your students about the United Nations and its efforts to help the world address its common problems. You might also want to tell them about a new UN Web site -- [www.unep.net](http://www.unep.net) -- which brings together maps, satellite images, legislation and other information from research institutions and databases around the world. It is a powerful new way for people anywhere to monitor the environment and be involved in protecting it.

Second is capacity-building in the developing world. The new wave of geographic technology has enormous potential. It can give us earlier warning of natural disasters and environmental threats, and enable us to plan our cities in ways that make them safer to live in. We must do more to make sure that these new tools are available to developing countries.

Third is the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, an international collaborative effort to map the health of our planet. This will be launched on World Environment Day in June, and I hope you will be among the scientists who are taking part.

Fourth, last year we at the United Nations established a Geographic Information Working Group to improve the way in which the many entities in our far-flung system use cartographic and geographic information. One of the Group's main goals is to establish a common UN Geographic Database. It will be working with national mapping agencies, non-governmental organizations, industry groups and research institutions. The first formal meeting will be held later this month. I encourage you to contact us and get involved, if you have not done so already.

The great adventure of geographic exploration is far from over. But in the future, we must also venture forth on an internal landscape -- on the mental maps we all carry with us.

These maps are built of very personal and local ingredients: our streets, families and livelihoods; our likes and dislikes; our convictions and prejudices. More and more, however, global considerations are pressing in -- new products, people and ideas; new opportunities, but also new threats.

Our mental maps are stubborn constructs, and in some respects as individual as fingerprints. But make no mistake, they are being redrawn by the forces of globalization. Our challenge today is to retain their diversity, while stimulating greater awareness of our common heritage, values and interests.

The idea of interdependence is old hat to geographers, but for most people it is a new garment they are only now trying on for size. Getting it to fit -- and getting it imprinted on the mental maps that guide our voices and our choices -- is one of the crucial projects of human geography for the twenty-first century. I look forward to working with you in that all-important journey.  
Thank you very much.