The thirteenth session of the AWG-KP and the eleventh session of the AWG-LCA
Bonn, 2 August 2010

Opening speech by Christiana Figueres, Executive Secretary
United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

Just over 500 years ago, Christopher Columbus set sail for uncharted waters, determined to change the map of the world. While he was a man of his times with all the faults of his times, he certainly far exceeded his own expectations.

Like Columbus, we are people of our times with all the constraints of our times and yet we, too, stand on the threshold of a new world. Whether we succumb to the storms of climate change or work together to reach the far shore is up to us to decide.

What is at stake here is none other than the long-term, sustainable future of humanity. Thus as individuals, as governments, as a global community, we must all exceed our own expectations, simply because nothing less will do.

We know the milestones science has set. We know by when and by how much greenhouse gas emissions must drop to have a chance of avoiding the worst impacts of climate change, devastating for the most vulnerable and the poorest around the world.

Time is not on our side. Decisions need to be taken, perhaps in an incremental manner, but most certainly with firm steps and unwavering resolve. We must progress in the full knowledge that we cannot cross the ocean on a single gust of wind. But, if we don't raise the sails higher now, we may never discover a safer, more stable world.

Friends, for 15 years, I worked with you in our shared task of delivering the solutions that governments must offer humanity.

Now, as your Executive Secretary, it is my honour to work for you. It is my priority to ensure that the secretariat continues to support the negotiations and enhance the implementation of your decisions with its unflagging commitment, professionalism and integrity.

I approach this task with a deep sense of humility, honouring the achievements of these negotiations, but also acutely aware of the rapidly rising scale and urgency of what must still be done. Governments alone can not solve climate change, but only governments, working together, can help the world pilot the course most effectively.

Like Columbus, citizens, societies and businesses everywhere today need the incentives and the resources to set off confidently into uncharted waters. It is the prime task of governments to set

the sails ever higher, to help humanity capture the powerful winds of change that are waiting to be released.

Transformations like this are made by grasping the politically possible at every step, by turning countless, diverse and sometimes conflicting interests to a common purpose.

The governments of the world, represented by you here today, have been steadily building that common ground since the UNFCCC began; in Rio, Kyoto, Marrakesh, Bali, and yes, Copenhagen. And this year, in Cancún, the climate negotiations can further the cause of multilateralism.

In Cancún, my friends, you have both the responsibility and the opportunity to take the next essential step: to turn the politically possible into the politically irreversible.

Five hundred years after Columbus sailed, another man from a very different world has triumphed over his own long and difficult journey.

Nelson Mandela, very much a man of our times, tells us: "There is no passion to be found playing small, in settling for a life that is less than the one you are capable of living. We must use time wisely, and forever realise that the time is always ripe to do right."

Friends, the time is ripe. I trust you will do right.

Thank you.

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