

## **Address at the Welcome Ceremony of the World Summit on Sustainable Development**

25 August 2002

Friends,  
Peoples of the World:

On behalf of the Secretary General of the United Nations, the Honourable Kofi Annan, the government and people of South Africa, I am privileged to welcome you to Johannesburg and South Africa to the World Summit for Sustainable Development.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank and salute the producers, the directors and the artists who have combined their skills and talents to use this stage to communicate the important messages to all of us we have just witnessed.

As they said, we welcome the peoples of the world to the place that is recognised as the cradle of humanity. The Johannesburg World Summit for Sustainable Development is therefore, for all of us, a homecoming, a return to the base from where all humanity evolved to cover the globe.

For the peoples of the world this is a homecoming in other ways as well. When we say welcome to South Africa, we say welcome to a democratic South Africa. We say welcome to a South Africa made up of the peoples of various races, colours and cultures who inhabit our common planet.

To all of them, despite their diversity, South Africa is a common home. They share not only a common geographic space, but also a common destiny. Divided and set against one another in the past by the cruel designs and actions of human beings who monopolised power, today they are striving to achieve unity among themselves, while respecting and encouraging their diversity.

Whereas, as the Rio Earth Summit took place ten years ago, the death of many caused by racial oppression and racial antagonisms was an ugly part of their daily lives, today, these South Africans of many races, colours, cultures and religions are hard at work to achieve peace and national reconciliation.

Conscious of the social catastrophe caused by many centuries of human abuse, they are striving to end poverty and underdevelopment among themselves, to restore the dignity of all South Africans by extricating everybody, man, woman and child, from the dehumanising condition of poverty, hunger, ill-health, ignorance and social exclusion.

Proud of the fact that they are Africans and moved by the fact that the peoples of Africa share a common burden of conflict, poverty and underdevelopment, they are determined to work hand in hand with their brothers and sisters throughout the continent, to end five hundred years of suffering and the treatment of Africans by others, as less than human.

These South Africans, who occupy the land that is the cradle of humanity, also know what has happened to the natural environment that enabled the evolution of all life on earth, and the emergence of humanity itself.

Around them they see the degradation of the soil. They know the central importance of water to the sustenance of life. They have seen how the natural forests were decimated.

They know of the depletion of the resources of the giant oceans that meet along our southern coast. They experience the pollution of the earth, the air, the rivers and the seas, caused by human activity. They know of droughts and floods. They experience the environmental suffering borne by slum-dwellers and others immersed in poverty.

Understanding the umbilical cord that ties us to the planet earth, they are determined to do everything possible to save the earth from ourselves, to save the earth for ourselves, to ensure that as it took millions of years for humanity to evolve and emerge, so must humanity survive and develop for millions more years on the basis of a healthy partnership between people and the planet, on the basis of a sustainable relationship between a prosperous world and a healthy environment.

When we say to the peoples of the world, welcome to your home, it is therefore to say welcome to a place of peace, of human solidarity, of hope, of a common striving towards sustainable development.

You, the peoples of the world engaged in struggle to give us the possibility to realise these outcomes. For decades, you fought side by side with us to defeat the apartheid crime against humanity, which stood out as a grievous offence against everything humanity understands by and strives for, when it resolves that the objectives of sustainable development must be achieved.

South Africa is what she is today because, driven by the spirit of human and international solidarity, you, the peoples of the world took a stand and said that apartheid in South Africa will not pass! Because of what you did, today we are able to speak of South Africa as a country of freedom. Because of what you did, today our government and people are able to host the World Summit for Sustainable Development, whereas only ten years ago, correctly, the apartheid government had no place at, and could not attend the Rio Earth Summit.

You were the midwives of the free and democratic South Africa. You were the architects of the common victory against racist domination and a crime against humanity. Necessarily, free and democratic South Africa cannot be truly thus and true to itself unless she becomes the home of the peoples of the world who united in action to make her a common home for all her people.

It is also in the context therefore, that tonight, we say to the peoples of the world - welcome home!

We stand now ten years on from the Rio Earth Summit, at the beginning of a new Millennium. The time has come to reflect anew on the state of the world today. None of us cannot be dismayed at what we see. We see a world that is ailing from poverty, inequality and environmental degradation, despite the agreements at the Rio Earth Summit. This is a world in which a rich minority enjoys unprecedented levels of consumption, comfort and prosperity, while the poor majority endures daily hardship, suffering and dehumanisation.

We see a world that is in crisis through the effects of unsustainable development and the injudicious exploitation of natural resources, in which poverty is exacerbated by war and conflict. This is a world still coming to terms with the threat of terrorism. We live in a world in which our resolve to bequeath to future generations a sustainable and viable future has been found wanting.

At a time like this, we should remember and take heed of the words of that great Indian poet and thinker, Rabindranath Tagore, who said:

"The greed of gain has no time or limit to its capaciousness. Its one object is to produce and consume. It has pity neither for beautiful nature nor for living human beings. It is ruthlessly ready without a moment's hesitation to crush beauty and life out of them, moulding them to money."

We welcome you to Johannesburg and to the World Summit for Sustainable Development, understanding that we have all converged at the Cradle of Humanity to confront the social behaviour that has pity neither for beautiful nature nor for living human beings.

This social behaviour has produced and entrenches a global system of apartheid. The suffering of the billions who are the victims of this system calls for the same response that drew the peoples of the world into the struggle for the defeat of apartheid in this country.

Our common and decisive victory against domestic apartheid confirms that you, the peoples of the world, have both the responsibility and the possibility to achieve a decisive victory against global apartheid. Out of Johannesburg and out of Africa, must emerge something new that takes the world forward away from the entrenchment of global apartheid, to the realisation of the goals of sustainable development.

This is a moment of hope, not despair. We are meeting here in Johannesburg under the theme - People, Planet, Prosperity. For the first time in human history we have both the knowledge and resources to meet the challenges contained in this evocative theme.

Through our actions, governments, business, labour and civil society, working in solidarity and cooperation, we can and must be the custodians of a truly positive legacy of hope, of prosperity, a better life to all of humanity and a secure future for the global environment. We have no choice but to unite in action to ensure the triumph of the vision of sustainable development. Acting together, we will win!

Welcome to Johannesburg.

I thank you.