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Statement by M. GORBACHEV

Chairman of the Board, Green Cross International
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Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear Colleagues,

There are decisions that we make and there are decisions that time and circumstances make for us.

This is precisely the situation in which humankind found itself at the end of last century, a situation of no choice. In 1999, 1.3 billion people - or one-fourth of the population of the Earth – were living in extreme poverty; 800 million were suffering from malnutrition; 6.2 million orphans under 15 whose parents had died of AIDS were struggling for survival; and one-third of the world's population had no adequate access to drinking water. I fully share the view of the UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan that the paralysis of political will is one of the main causes of such a disastrous state of affairs.

The critics of the Millennium Development Goals say that they are overambitious and that the targets set are unreachable. I totally disagree with this assessment. I believe we are talking here about the minimum requirements for a decent human life: the MDGs express our commitment to a world where people have shelter, food and access to water and sanitation; where new born babies and their mothers do not die from the lack of basic medical care; and where gender inequality – that humiliating throwback to the past – has disappeared for good. If we cannot honour our commitment to these basic human necessities what future is there for our civilization, our very humanity?

Finally, we are talking about preserving the environment, which is our common home. According to a UN-sponsored study carried out by 1,300 experts in 95 countries 60% of the ecosystems that support life on earth have been degraded and exhausted to such an extent that their recovery may no longer be possible. But problems do not end here: scientists believe that the harmful effects of this degradation will worsen considerably within the next 50 years.

Five years have passed since the adoption of the Millennium Declaration, one third of the time that the international community has given itself to reach the Declaration's goals. As you know, in September the UN General Assembly will discuss the progress made so far, but, already today it is clear that the results are not reassuring.

According to UN-HABITAT, since 2003, the number of people living in slums has grown by 50 million, which is two times the population of Tokyo. These slums, where there is no point in talking about the “environment” and where most of the people live on less than one dollar per day – are a breeding ground for AIDS and other diseases, and their levels of infant and maternal mortality exceed any reasonable - or even unreasonable - limits.

Recalling his recent visit to a hospital in Kenya, where there is one nurse for 80 patients and one bed for three, Jeffery Sachs, Director of the UN Millennium Project, said: “One patient has tuberculosis, another has AIDS and the third - malaria. All three share the same bed – and we call this civilized society!”

Diarrhoeal diseases have killed more children in the past ten years than all the people lost to armed conflict since World War II. More than 1.1 billion people have no access to drinking water and 2.4 billion have no access to basic sanitation. The number of children dying every day from the lack of drinking water and sanitation is equivalent to the imaginary number of victims that would result from a simultaneous crash of thirty Boeing 747s.

If no urgent and effective measures are taken, the situation will inevitably deteriorate further and may become irreversible.

A lot has been said about the interrelation of the different goals set by the UN General Assembly. Water is probably the best example in this respect and progress in this area would entail positive developments in other domains. All the tragic situations I have mentioned are in one way or another linked to water: thirst, hunger, hygiene, agriculture, women’s hardship, medical care – this list is far from complete. It is therefore appropriate that the current decade has as its theme “Water for Life”.

According to FAO, to satisfy the needs of the planet’s growing population, the production of food must increase by 67 % over the next 25 years. If today’s rate of agriculture productivity growth continues, water demand will increase by only 14 % over this period.

At the same time, half a billion people are already living in countries where access to water is described in a recent UN report as “limited”. Unless we manage to halt the water crisis, by 2025 this figure will have reached 3.4 billion.

Water, which is vital for the peaceful and essential human needs I have mentioned, is becoming, like all scarce resources, a cause of conflicts. Unless dealt with now, these conflicts could become more violent and more widespread in coming decades. Some 263 countries share water basins and almost 200 agreements have been signed over the past 50 years with regard to trans-border water resources. To date, both international law and development support for cooperation related to river basins and aquifers are insufficient for meeting these challenges. The large majority of States have demonstrated their lack of commitment to genuine cooperation over shared water by neither including this objective in the WSSD agreements, nor ratifying the 1997 UN Convention on the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses. I hope commitments in this direction will be achieved at this session.

We, in Green Cross International know about these problems firsthand. For many years GCI has been implementing a number of large-scale projects related to international integrated watercourses management. Based on this experience, we presented a report on National Sovereignty and International Watercourses at the 2000 Second World Water Forum in The Hague.

According to the estimates of UN specialized agencies, if governments allocated an amount equivalent to \$20 per capita towards solving the water crisis every year, it would take only 10 years to solve the problem. Moreover, according to a recent assessment by WHO, every dollar invested in reaching the Millennium Development Goals can bring from 3 to 34 dollars of revenue. Just \$20 per person: here in New York that is the cost of 20 bottles of mineral water or 20 cups of coffee – how can anyone claim that is unattainable? The CSD NGO Consortium that gathered international NGOs,

Oxfam, WWF, WaterAid, Care, Tearfund, Birdlife and Green Cross International proposed to double the spending of donors and developing countries from US\$14bn to US\$30bn per year in order to meet the water and sanitation target, with special priority given to Africa.

If, on the other hand, the water supply and sanitation crisis is not addressed, half of the countries of the world will face a serious water crisis by 2020 and one-third of the planet's population will be left without basic sanitation and practically without water. That is a terrifying prospect.

The problem of overcoming the water crisis comprises many complex and controversial questions - How much would it cost to provide everybody with water and sanitation? (The Camdessus Report estimates differ from those of the Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council and other organizations) What is the role of the private sector and how to cover the costs? Which methods are the best? – while debates continue about the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), especially after the WTO Ministerial Conference in Cancun.

Privatization is often a stumbling block in discussions about the water crisis and the management of water resources and services, be it at the level of governments or among the concerned non-governmental organizations. I would like to state clearly that Green Cross International is totally against the deregulation of water resources and services management. However, GCI recognizes that national and local companies, as well as international corporations may contribute to overcoming the water crisis, as they steadily diversify their offer of water services. However, they should do it only when those immediately concerned consider it the most reasonable option from the ecological, social and economic standpoints. The implementation of such projects and works must be placed under the control of public authorities, with full respect for the fundamental principles of the Human Right to Water. Corruption, disregard for the interests of the poor and failure to inform the different participants of the process by public or private water providers must be immediately and severely sanctioned in each particular case. Green Cross International believes, however, that the issue of involving the private sector is not the most important one and does not hold the key to providing water to all those who are currently deprived of it.

I am convinced that we must advance all together instead of letting the issue of privatization become an insurmountable obstacle for the elaboration of a universally acceptable strategy that would make a real contribution to reaching the Millennium Goals and, ultimately, ensure universal access to water.

That water is indispensable for a variety of functions is obvious to all. However, not everybody realizes that water cannot be considered as a mere commodity whose various functions represent interchangeable values.

Water for life - which is the basic function of water for all living beings - must be unconditionally recognized as the top priority so as to ensure the sustainable development of ecosystems and adequate access to water and sanitation for all.

Water for development - which is an economic function relating to production activities - concerns in general private interests and should be considered from the standpoint of its role in improving people's standard of living. It is this function that is directly related to the problems of water scarcity and pollution arising in the world. Water supply for industries and agriculture must not only be based on economic efficiency but also take into account social and ecological aspects, and it must always be under public control so as to ensure sustainable development.

We need more active participation by civil society in the discussion on water-related issues. Our position must be based on the principles of sustainable development and justice, on a clear understanding of water's various functions and on our capacity to get our priorities right, giving preference to human rights over private and market interests.

National governments adopt different approaches to water-related problems. In some countries, like Chile, the poor receive water subsidies, in others, like South Africa, each poor household is provided with a certain amount of water free of charge. Some states consider this issue at the highest legislative and political levels. In Uruguay, for example, a national referendum held in 2004 resulted in the right to water being included in the country's Constitution. Tomorrow, the Russian Duma will discuss a draft Water Law aimed at reforming the federal system of public water resources management.

There are many approaches to solving water-related problems, yet a clear common position on the matter is still missing.

In this connection, I would like to share with you a thought, which may appear commonplace to some of you. I believe it indispensable that all those who today take part in the ongoing discussions at different levels, and particularly those who have the power to make final decisions, realize that we are working for the entire Millennium. In other words, this is not about finding one-time solutions and a little tinkering here and there, but about drawing up a long-term and realistic policy, which would take into account not only the past experience but also forecasts for the future.

However, the key issue is the moral aspect of the problem. When reading papers and listening to speeches on water, as well as on the Millennium Development Goals in general, one gets the impression that we are talking only about voluntary aid by the rich to the poor, be it countries or people. I cannot agree with such an approach and I beg your pardon if I put it somewhat bluntly: this is not about charity, no matter what form it takes; this is about EQUALITY of all people in satisfying their basic needs and about the RIGHT of every person to access clean, drinkable water and basic sanitation.

Why is it that this fundamental right is still not guaranteed internationally? Perhaps, back in 1948, when the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was being drafted, its authors considered it so obvious that all people must have access to clean water that they did not think it necessary to stipulate this right in international legislation on human rights. I don't think we should criticize them for that. Today, for example, we are not discussing a human right to air, but who can guarantee that this will not become an issue in the future?

The right to water is mentioned more or less explicitly in a number of international legal documents: in the Action Plan adopted by the UN Water Conference in Mar del Plata (1977), in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979), in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), and in the Dublin Statement on Water and Sustainable Development (1992), as well as in many national laws.

Nevertheless, there is no international instrument that would guarantee to every person the right to economically affordable drinking water, oblige national authorities to respect this right and, what is even more important, provide a model and a mechanism for its implementation. Despite this critical situation, governments - with a few exceptions - are not prepared to start the inevitably complex and lengthy negotiations with a view to drafting a new international law.

One important step in the right direction was made in November 2002, when the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights recognized the right to water as a basic human right. In theory, the 145 countries that have ratified the International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights are thus obliged to gradually ensure fair access to clean drinking water. However, the Committee's interpretation of this document does not imply any legal obligation for governments to implement its provisions.

Green Cross International and its partners propose to start talks with a view to adopting a Universal Convention on the Right to Water. The ratification of such a convention by the UN Member States would give a legal instrument to all people to defend their right to clean water and sanitation,

and would oblige governments to ensure its implementation. The convention would help distinguish between the different aspects of water use and the related rights and obligations of different participants in this process at the local, national and international levels. We are not so naïve as to think that the Convention, or any other document for the matter, regardless of how thoroughly it may have been prepared, would immediately provide water to all those who are currently deprived. We are convinced however that only a law-based approach to the use of water resources can gradually make water accessible to all.

Discussions on the fundamental principles of the proposed Convention have been going on for four years. At the Water for Peace meeting that took place in June 2004 in Barcelona as part of the World Forum of Cultures, these principles were approved by more than 1,100 representatives from 100 non-governmental organizations from all over the world.

In order to make governments realize the importance of this issue, their voters must clearly and persistently demonstrate their concern. This is why we need a world-wide public information campaign.

In this connection, Green Cross International, together with other international, national and local organizations, has initiated an international public campaign in order to convince national governments to start discussing the Convention (www.watertreaty.org). The idea has been met with interest from a number of countries and we hope this number will grow. I call on all participants at this meeting to seriously consider the possibility of supporting the idea of drafting such a Convention on the Right to Water by the governments of your countries and by your respective organizations. Should the General Assembly support this initiative this September, this would be highly appreciated by the international community and by millions of people in need of water as a concrete step towards the resolution of the water crisis.

Time is a luxury not enjoyed by those whose lives are cut cruelly short due to a lack of clean water, and time is also running out for the Millennium Development Goals. But we can still honour our commitments: failure is not an option on the table today, we will not be given a second chance.

Thank you.