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## DPI/NGO Briefing

### *“May I Ask a Question, Mr. President?”*

*With*

*H.E. Mr. Miguel d'Escoto Brockmann,  
 President of the 63rd Session of the United Nations General Assembly*

15 January 2009

#### Summary

**Ms. Maria-Luisa Chavéz**, Chief of the NGO Relations Cluster of the Department of Public Information, opened the Briefing by extending Happy New Year's wishes to all.

**Mr. Kiyo Akasaka**, Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information, in his opening remarks emphasized that the New Year had started on a serious note. “We face many challenges this year,” he said, including the economic crisis, the food crisis, climate change, and the continued push on the achievement of the MDGs. In addition, he cited grave challenges to peace and security in Darfur, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Somalia, Afghanistan, Iraq and Gaza. He said that in the context of these pressing issues, the work of the NGOs this year will be of great importance and value to the peoples of the world and to the United Nations. He stressed that the NGOs and the United Nations needed to work hard together on the challenges ahead—all of which required global solutions.

**Ms. Maria-Luisa Chavez**, introduced the new season of Briefings, highlighting the first in the new series, “May I Ask a Question?”, which she explained would provide an opportunity for the NGOs to interact with influential leaders of the United Nations community. She explained that though the hope was to have H.E. Mr. Miguel d'Escoto Brockmann, President of the 63rd Session of the United Nations General Assembly as the first guest on this series, because of the Special Emergency session of the General Assembly, unfortunately President d'Escoto Brockmann was unable to attend. He had however sent two representatives from his office to speak on his behalf namely Her Excellency Sophia Clark, The Deputy Chef de

Cabinet in the office of the President and Mr. Michael Clark, Senior Advisor on Nuclear Disarmament and International Security to the President.

**Ambassador Sophia Clark**, The Deputy Chef de Cabinet in the office of the President, apologized for absence of the President, whom she explained was chairing the Special Emergency situation in Gaza being discussed by the Assembly. She commented that the work of NGOs was vital and that it was important for the UN and especially DPI to offer this kind of opportunity to interact with the NGOs. She then opened the floor for discussion and questions.

**Question:** Were there any points of convergence coming out of the discussions held in Doha, and how was the financial crisis being addressed by the United Nations?. The question addressed the fact that the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund were conspicuously absent from the recent international financial negotiations in Doha.

**Answer:** : Mr. Clark explaining what action the President of the General Assembly had taken as it became clear that everyone in the planet would be affected by the financial crisis. The President of the General Assembly, he stated, had consulted a group of experts who came from different regions of the world. This group was expanded into a formal Commission of experts, known as the Commission of Experts of the President of the UN General Assembly on Reform of the International Monetary and Financial System. The objectives of the Commission were to look at the impact of the financial crisis on developing countries and the poor wherever they are, to assess the impact and scope of the crisis, to see what creative ideas there were for addressing it and to evaluate what systemic changes might be put in train to address the problems that have emerged. Mr. Clark noted that they were now at a reflective point in the study and the Commission hoped to release a paper on the subject in the third week in March. He said the Commission was working very transparently and were receiving unsolicited papers and analyses of country and regional situations. They also hoped to get NGO input once the paper is released. The President of the General Assembly, he said, hoped to convene a major conference on this issue at the level of heads of state and government and would be producing an outcome document with recommendations for immediate action. This, it was hoped, would occur in late May or early June. Mr. Clark noted that the President was making every effort to increase the role of UN General Assembly in addressing this crisis particularly as it affected the needs of the developing countries and those who have been marginalized.

**Question:** Did the financial crisis have an intersection with the ecological crisis and concerns about climate change?

**Answer:** Mr. Clark said the President had appointed special observers to monitor this trend noting that the economic crisis had impacted not only the financial world but climate change, food, and even trade agreements. He gave the example of countries imposing subsidies to protect their own citizens. He stressed that this issue was one on which the President welcomed help from NGOs, among others.

Ambassador Clark remarked, , that priorities of the office of the President of the General Assembly included concerns about Small Island Developing States, especially those in the Pacific, as well as on the rights of the individual to food and intellectual property rights, among others. She expressed the view that the General Assembly President felt strongly that in looking at issues on the UN agenda there was a need to examine the moral and ethical perspectives of these matters. She gave the example of access to water and desertification

which she said were basic human rights but she stressed these issues should be looked at from both their complexity and inter-relationships.

**Comment:** Another member of the audience suggested adding carbon accounts to the balance of payments, where every individual would have carbon permits that could be expressed in monetary units. Mr. Clark said such pertinent suggestions from the NGOs were especially welcome. He said the Commission of Experts had to work fast and needed firm ideas such as that put forward by the questioner, to move forward. He hoped this and similar innovative ideas would find expression in the work of the Commission.

### **Concerns expressed by NGOs**

- One NGO expressed the view that civil society organizations were extremely concerned that the UN process to address the financial crisis would be eclipsed by the G20 meeting.
- Another concern was the lack of any substantive access to the work of the Commission of Experts of the President of the UN General Assembly on Reforms of the International Monetary and Financial System particularly because their outcome document would be due during third week of March, when the G20 was scheduled to meet in the first week of April.
- The questioner voiced concern that if the NGO community was going to be helpful to the Commission and the UN, and be able to use some leverage at the G20 meeting, they would need some substantive input and feedback from the Commission before the beginning of April.

**Answer:** Mr. Clark encouraged the NGOs to check the Commission's website for the Terms of Reference and other relevant information on the work of the Commission. He however stressed that this was not about fighting with the G20. He said there were two important points that were basic to this effort. One was that though the G20 had made promises to the developing countries, it had not really shown a substantive focus. The second was that of all the various groups working on the problem the General Assembly with its representation of 192 member states was the one group that could legitimize and coordinate this effort.

Ambassador Clark added that the Commission was not a representative body of member States and therefore were given more freedom and were able to look at the issue from a more global perspective.

**Question:** What could the President of the General Assembly do to encourage effective inclusion of NGOs in seeking a solution to the problem of global international migration in the face of increasing human rights violations by both sending and receiving countries.

**Answer:** Ambassador Clark said that the issue was not a priority of the 63rd Session. However, she stressed that the General Assembly had been involved, working with the UN office of Drugs and Crime in Vienna and various UN specialized agencies on the broader human rights aspects of this issue, including the question of human trafficking. Ms. Clark said one issue that had been brought to the Assembly's attention and that it was examining was the right to education in situations of humanitarian disaster and armed conflict which often affected internally displaced persons.

**Question:** What steps were being taken to reduce military spending as the Organization was mandated to do? The questioner further asked to what extent should the General Assembly

play a more active role on this issue and if the President of the General Assembly was planning to take action in future on disarmament.?

**Answer** Mr. Clark stated that disarmament was a high priority for the President. However, the Assembly's efforts on disarmament had been eclipsed somewhat by the financial crisis. He said that he had been asked by the President to look at the ongoing initiatives, such as the Arms Trade Treaty, to try to come up with outcome-based objectives so that the success of these groups could be measured. He noted that there was a tendency to produce reports when these groups should be producing draft conventions and calling for action. He explained the President wanted to break this habit and make sure that groups actually define objectives and put real working proposals before for the General Assembly to act on. He mentioned that there was a new global nuclear disarmament movement emerging which was being embraced by Prime Minister Gordon Brown of the United Kingdom, President Nicolas Sarkozy of France, President-Elect Barack Obama of the United States as well as the Prime Minister of India who are suggesting that this class of weapons be eliminated under a new initiative known as "global zero." Mr. Clark said there was a big difference between lowering of the numbers of weapons and eliminating nuclear weapons under international control. He said he saw a role for scientists to be mobilised around this issue. He also expressed the view that the expansion of the so called "nuclear club" called into the question the framework of Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

**Question:** One NGO commented that many in the NGO community saw the Security Council as the most dysfunctional part of the UN system. Did the the Office of the President have any ideas to share on the question of Security Council reform?

**Answer:** Mr. Clark stated that it was best if this question was answered by President d'Escoto Brockmann himself, as he had a "predilection" for action on this matter.

Ambassador Clark said the President had been very outspoken on his view that the Council was indeed dysfunctional. She said though Security Council reform was one of the top three priorities of the Assembly President he wanted to deal with it last as it was the most difficult. She said the President believed that simply adding more members to the Council based on geography and population was not a major solution. He would also argue, she noted, that use of the veto should be addressed. He was of the view that the veto should only be used in the interest of the world body and that promoting peace and security has to be the overriding fact in promoting the greater good.

**Question:** What can the NGO community do to implement the goals of the General Assembly's Commission?.

**Answer:** Mr. Clark stressed that NGOs should pay attention to developments and introduce some sort of structure within the NGOs to occasionally have an online discussion, conference calls or whatever communication channels would be most appropriate.

The briefing was attended by 150 representatives of NGOs that were accredited by the Department of Public Information.

Prepared by Gail B-T Sainté with assistance from Tatiana Alvarado, Heather Lee and Albert Lee

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