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Filthy water cannot be washed

[Introduction]

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

‘Water means life’. Many scientists have spent their entire lives searching for water on other planets. For them, the existence of water on another planet is proof of life: proof that we are not alone in the universe. Traces of water on Mars have led NASA to believe that it once had the right conditions to support life. Where there is water, there is the possibility of life. This illustrates the importance of water on our own planet too.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

I am not here to speak about little green men, although cynics sometimes describe environmentalists that way. I am here to speak about real men and women and the ecosystems they depend on. I am here to speak about the critical link between water, food and ecosystems. This subject is closely linked to poverty: poor people suffer more than others from environmental degradation. They are often forced to live in environmentally unsafe conditions. Poor environmental conditions lead to poor health and, consequently, to loss of income. Income they need to survive.

But before starting on the main substance of my speech, I would like to remember for a moment the victims of the recent tsunami disaster. At a conference where water is on the agenda, it is obvious that our thoughts go out to them. For many, on 26 December, water meant death. The best way we can honour these people is to honour our commitments and provide the emergency and reconstruction aid we have promised.

[Commitments and results]

This brings me to the first subject I wish to discuss: living up to our commitments and turning them into results. Many times over the years, world leaders have solemnly pledged to turn the world away from environmental disaster and disastrous poverty. Last week, a World Economic Forum think tank in Davos published a report card for the international community. The card assesses the world’s efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals, the goals from the Johannesburg summit and other international targets. Sadly, the world did not pass the test. On poverty, it scored four out of ten; on environment: three. If my children came home with grades as bad as that, I would ground them. However, the international community cannot afford to sit still and think things over. It must act and it must act now.

Without writing my own report card, I think I can safely say that the Netherlands’ grades would be better than that. We are fully committed to turning concrete commitments into concrete results. Let me give you some examples to illustrate that commitment:

- The Netherlands spends 0.8% of GDP on development cooperation, of which 0.1% of GDP is allocated to the priority themes of environment and water.
- I am the first Dutch Minister for Development Cooperation to report back to Parliament on results achieved.
- I also report back to the international community: the Netherlands was the first country to publish an MDG8 report.
- The Netherlands is currently implementing an MDG7 action plan. For instance, by 2015, we will have provided ten million people in developing countries with sustainable energy. Today I announce that we will commit ourselves to provide access to safe drinking water and sanitation for fifty million people by 2015.

But we can't go it alone. Without the full engagement of a country like the United States, the task before us is too great. A few weeks ago, George W. Bush started his second term of office with a renewed promise of closer international cooperation. But, as they say, 'the proof of the pudding is in the eating'. International cooperation is not an à la carte menu. In this world of interdependence, every problem is a problem for everyone. This is as true for poverty and environmental degradation as it is for terrorism.

A good example is climate change. The United States should return to the table to discuss the implementation of global climate change agreements. On 16 February, the Kyoto Protocol will come into force, but the US has opted out. Fortunately, dealing with climate change is one of the priorities of the British G8 Presidency. Prime Minister Tony Blair confirmed this last week, during the World Economic Forum in Davos. If we don't get down to business on climate change, nature might be damaged beyond repair. As the African saying goes: 'filthy water cannot be washed.' In its recent report, the International Climate Change Taskforce stresses that the cost of smart and effective action now is small compared to the cost of doing nothing. If we fail, no country will escape the social and economic consequences of the resulting droughts, floods and higher sea levels. But, as I said earlier, the poor especially will pay the price. According to some estimates, African GDP could decline by up to ten per cent as a result of climate change.

Jeffrey Sachs of the UN Millennium Project rightly states that 'the environment is much too often taken as given, or taken for granted, as a resource to be exploited in the short run.' As this conference will certainly show, if we are to achieve the MDGs we must follow the path of sustainable development. Unfortunately, I don't find any concrete policy recommendations on this issue in Sachs' overall report. Aside from this and other shortcomings, I am glad, that the report challenges the international community to improve its report card and to turn commitments into results.

[How can we make it happen?]

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

The motto of this conference is: 'Make It Happen!'. The question then, of course, is: how can we make it happen? How can we achieve the results we all need? How can we improve the lives of poor people and the ecosystems they depend on? This conference offers an effective answer: by integrating water management, agriculture and ecosystem conservation. The current practice of dealing with these issues separately is inadequate: it's impossible to split up the environment into isolated sectors. Unsustainable water use compromises ecosystems and consequently the basis for agriculture. Conversely, unsustainable methods of food production eventually erode the natural environment. Everything is connected to everything else. There are good examples of this from Dutch development cooperation practice.

In the 1980s, a large dam was built in the Logone floodplains of Cameroon, to develop rice production there. However, there was substantial collateral damage: the plains behind the dam deteriorated, condemning many farmers, shepherds and fishermen to poverty. Recently, the Netherlands successfully concluded a project to repair the damage. The plains are now once again inhabited by 100,000 people living from floodplain agriculture. Shepherds herd 300,000 head of cattle and fishermen catch 12,000 tons of fish annually. The virtuous circle of water, food and ecosystems has been restored. This success was also due to fruitful cooperation with local government and, especially, civil society. The involvement of the people directly involved is key. They know the specifics of the environment, and they are the ones that have to deal with the consequences of its degradation. To ensure sustainable development, the state needs to work in partnership with all stakeholders in society, including the private sector. Poverty reduction and sustainable development cannot be achieved without the private sector. That is why I've entered into public-private partnerships for sustainable development. In highly centralized countries such as Sudan and Ethiopia the state acts without consultation or consideration. And the absence of partnership can result in environmental disaster.

The Netherlands is considering supporting an integrated river development project in Mali. The project involves flood control and energy generation in the Senegal river. It should have a positive impact on agriculture and the environment. In general, I think the link between water management and energy is still somewhat of a blind spot. Hopefully, you can fill in the blanks during this conference. The Energy for Development conference, held in the Netherlands last December, stressed, that investment in the energy sector is a precondition for development. The link between water and energy has great potential: hydropower could provide all the energy Africa needs.

Another important relationship is between environment and security. This is clearly visible in a country like Sudan. In the Darfur region, as the result of a long drought, the desert is expanding. This has placed Arab nomadic herders and African subsistence farmers in competition for increasingly limited natural resources such as land and water. We all know what happened and is, unfortunately, still happening every day: killing, rape, looting and starvation. During my visit to Sudan, two weeks ago, I applauded the peace accord between the North and the South. But I also made it clear that most Dutch aid is conditional on stabilisation in Darfur. Reconstruction aid won't flow until blood stops flowing. Yesterday the Netherlands has called for a no-fly zone in Darfur because violence has flared up again. When peace has finally returned to the region, the underlying cause of the conflict – the rivalry about land, water and other resources – must also be dealt with.

[Conclusion]

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

I started by talking about the search for water on other planets, and about little green men. In a way, I hope we don't find them soon. Life on this planet is already complicated enough, with the problems of poor environment and poor people. There is enough work for us here. We must show the poor that they are not alone in the universe. That we care about their fate and the environment they live in. The best way we, as the international community, can show this is to honour our many commitments to end poverty and to put a stop to environmental degradation. Every country stands to benefit from this. A winning strategy to turn commitments into results is to integrate water management, agriculture and ecosystem conservation. I have discussed a few examples from Dutch development cooperation practice. I am confident that this conference will provide us with other useful lessons learned. This is necessary, because we must constantly improve our strategies. Only then can we turn the tide, before it's too late. Before the water becomes so filthy that it can no longer be washed.