

**Key Note Speech by Neal Walker, UN Resident Coordinator and
UNDP Resident Representative at the Closing ceremony of
American-Bangladeshi Youth Leadership Exchange Programme (ABYLEP)**

11 January 2012 at 6:30pm
Scholastica Uttara Campus

Distinguished Ambassador Dan Mozena of the United States;
Your Excellency, Honourable Member of Parliament, Mr. Saber Chowdury;
Dear Students and Young Scholars;
Distinguished Educators and Ladies and gentlemen;
Good evening and warm greetings to you all;

I am delighted to be here with this promising group of young students at the closing ceremony of the American- Bangladeshi Youth Leadership Exchange Programme (ABYLEP) hosted jointly by the United States Department of State, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, World Savvy, Scholastica School and SPEED.

The first thing I will say is -- forget the nay-sayers: climate change is a scientifically established fact. The exact impact is not easy to predict but we know enough to be certain that there are very real risks and potentially catastrophic risks. Worst case scenarios include the melting of the ice-caps that would put many countries under water, and changes in the Gulf Stream off the coast of America that would bring about drastic climatic changes such as increased drought and extreme weather events. But despite the real threat, I am optimistic. In fact, I am confident that there is growing consensus not only on the importance of the problem, but on how to address it. It is something that both all of you and I can directly relate to, even if in different ways. All of you, as young adults, will face the challenge of climate change head-on. **Your actions**, individually, or within organizations or as a citizen of your country, either Bangladesh or the United States, will make a difference in the actual quality of your lives! From my perspective, climate change is a global phenomenon and, from my admittedly biased perspective, the United Nations constitutes the best forum for building consensus on equitable solutions. The United Nations is also a major partner for the countries of the world, in implementing those solutions.

Today, I thought I would address three questions. First, from a global perspective, what is the problem, and what are the actions to be taken. Second, from the perspective of Bangladesh, what does climate change mean, and what are we doing about it, together with our national partners. Finally, I would like to talk a little bit about what all of you can do to help address this major problem.

I have already briefly defined the problem from a global perspective. Essentially, there are three distinctive features. First, greenhouse gases, once emitted, stay in the atmosphere a long time. So the effect builds up, and what has already been emitted, is not easy to clean up. Thus, even if we begin today, there will be a real “time lag” before we begin to see the results of our actions.

Second, addressing the problem has become really urgent. Global negotiations to address the problem take time, achieving results will take even longer. If I might say it like this: the problem is already “in-our-face” and therefore, we’ve got to work quickly, immediately, both at the political level in getting agreement, and at the technical level, in terms of implementing solutions.

Finally, the problem is unique in its global scale. The atmosphere does not distinguish among the countries: once those gases are out there, all countries suffer the consequences.

In short, as we look at the problem of climate change, it is clear: the challenges add up to a real need for rapid, effective action by individuals, by organizations, nation-states and by multi-lateral organizations.

The United Nations is supporting a global response on several different levels. We support research and we help scientists define the problem. Especially, I believe, we help them to transform what sometimes appears to be scientific gobble-degook into meaningful analysis and into clear policy recommendations.

At a second level, we pull people together and pressure for consensus around the right choices. This is something that I sincerely believe that the United Nations is extraordinarily good at. I would like to note, at this point, that my boss, the Secretary-General of the UN, Mr. Ban Ki-moon, is really passionate about the issue of climate change. Recently, he visited Bangladesh specifically to see the work underway here to address the challenge of climate change. And, at the global level, he has also been a strong advocate for action. The outcome of the recent talks in Durban, South Africa, constitutes a good example. On the evening before the scheduled end, no significant agreement had been reached. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, made a drastic statement. He gave a press conference in which he said that the Governments of the world, were simply failing to address the challenge and that it seemed they were unable to agree on meaningful actions. His passionate declaration, and the explicit definition what was still needed, led to an unprecedented 72 hours of non-stop negotiation, beyond the scheduled end of the conference, and several significant agreements:

- Delegates agreed to important details of critical objectives in funding the work, on technology transfer to lesser developed countries and on the specifics to reduce deforestation.

- Second, the delegates agreed to a second five year commitment period for the Kyoto Protocol. This keeps the emerging economies of China, Brazil, India, South Africa, Korea and Mexico, in the discussions. Without them, solutions would simply be partial and unsuccessful.
- Finally, the delegates agreed to reach an agreement by 2015 that will bring all countries in the world, under the same legal regime by 2020. It is too soon to tell if the legal regime to address climate change will be meaningful and successful, but the fact that we are all working towards addressing the challenge, as equals, is a major step.

Clearly, there is a lot of work still to be done to generate the global consensus for effective action. But I believe that the determined leadership of the United Nations constitutes a powerful force in moving us all in the right direction.

The third level of that the UN addresses climate change is at the country level. If you allow me here, I'll move to what the UN is doing to address climate change in Bangladesh. But first, let's think what this challenge means for Bangladesh. In fact, it is easy to understand: Bangladesh is caught between the melting Himalayas to the north, which are sending ever more unpredictable river-flow through the country, and the rising sea to the south, which is inundating densely populated land. Climate change in Bangladesh means more frequent natural disasters that are more intense and more destructive. I leave to your imagination the impact of these circumstances in a country the size of the state of Iowa that has a population of 150 million people.

In this context, what is the UN system's support to Bangladesh?

UN system has been a trusted partner to the people of Bangladesh since the founding of the country in one of the world's bloodiest civil wars back in the early 1970's. In doing our work, we pull in global experience and expertise and we blend it with local knowledge and practices – and I'm proud to note that more than 90% of our experts in Bangladesh are “national” experts - in order to find local solutions that are appropriate and sustainable. Our programming approach best fits the national context and maximizes impact and results.

But it is also true that Bangladesh gives BACK to the United Nations, in a real partnership. While UN system is here in the country to support the Government and its people in achieving their development goals, Bangladesh is one of the leading countries in the world in the provision of peace keeping troops, with almost 11,000 Bangladeshi troops serving in ten conflict affected countries across the world. Bangladesh has also been a tireless and constructive advocate in global forum around issues of human rights, climate change and development.

Getting back to the work to address climate change in Bangladesh, you should be aware that as we look at the solutions we must implement, it is critical to recognize that both Mitigation and Adaptation are needed: **Mitigation** means taking action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to avoid more climate change. It is about transforming the way that countries produce and use energy and changing industry and activities to reduce or eliminate emissions. **Adaptation** is the way people respond to new or changed conditions in climate, such as more droughts, flooding or severe storms. It means adapting our current and future lifestyles, towns, cities, infrastructure - everything! - to take account of climate change.

The projects that UN system is implementing to address climate change in Bangladesh are wide ranging. We are helping the government design clean energy policies. At a practical level, we helped introduce the ubiquitous clean fuel “CNG” rickshaws that move people in Dhaka. These clean engines replace the blue, smoky, two-cycle engines of yester-year and have significantly contributed to improving air quality in Dhaka. We are also supporting the introduction of clean technology for the production of bricks. As you may be aware, brick production using coal is a huge industry in Bangladesh with very high carbon and smoke emissions. While this initiative is only beginning, we believe we have made a good case that the clean technology not only improves life, but is economically viable as well. And another really interesting example we are helping to repopulate the mangroves in a “win-win” innovative coastal afforestation project. The project contributes to climate resilience by reclaiming lost land and protecting the coast; it promotes emissions reductions by expanding carbon sinks and it strengthens social protection for the poorest through cash-for-work employment.

However, without Government’s leadership and peoples’ participation, the United Nations is just a voice in the wind. I’m pleased to report that in the 8 months I’ve been in Bangladesh, I’ve seen real leadership by the Government on the international stage in calling for a global response to climate change. With sustained efforts and commitment by the Government and by stakeholders at large, we in UN have the strong foundation we need to provide effective support. Indeed! In addition to the concrete examples I have described above, the UN can help vulnerable countries access additional resources from global funds and we can help target policies and programmes towards the most vulnerable populations and the most urgent needs.

These are some of the actions we are taking, but allow me to conclude with the last point - the importance of youth in solving this critical global issue:

Earth is your planet, this is your life, and this challenge will be a part of it. The question is simply, will you be a part of the solution, or a part of the problem. I reference the very title of your program, and particularly, the word “Leadership”: attitude matters and young people matter. Youth have been at the forefront of mass movements that have brought about real

changes in society, most recently, throughout the middle-east. More often than not, leadership is exemplified in the small decisions, and the small actions, that we take as individual, or as a part of our group. How do I transport myself? In a gas-guzzling SUV? Or perhaps by public transport, or on a bicycle or on a motorcycle (as I do). I strongly encourage you to think creatively on the ways to address climate change effectively. You might consider that it is simply the right thing to do, or do it to make your world one that you will want to live in. Either way, the choices you make, the actions you lead, have a very important role to play in pushing for positive change.

In closing, I congratulate the organisers of this laudable initiative for hosting American-Bangladeshi Youth Leadership Exchange Program. I hope that the students will be able to capitalise the newly gained knowledge, field experience and deeper insights on Bangladesh's episode of climate change which is undoubtedly sharply different from their home country.

Thank you all very much.