

EXPERT GROUP MEETING

13-14 December, 2006

**Address by KUMARI SELJA, Minister of State
(Independent Charge) Housing & Urban Poverty
Alleviation Government of India**

Shri Jaipal Reddy Ji, Hon'ble Minister of Urban Development, Govt. of India, Shri Ranjit Issar, Secretary, Housing & Urban Poverty Alleviation, Govt. of India, Secretaries, officials from the UN-Habitat and experts from various countries, officials, representatives of media, Ladies and Gentlemen;

Let me once again welcome you all this morning in the Expert Group meeting of Asia-Pacific countries which is part of the Asia-Pacific Ministerial Conference being organized by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation, Government of India and the UN Habitat.

Promoting sustainable cities through the provision of adequate housing and civic amenities, especially to the poor, is one of the fundamental issues confronting most of the developing countries in the region. This Expert Group meeting is expected to deliberate on four basic themes so as to share experiences and expertise from the region and prepare a base document for further consideration in the Ministerial Conference. We are aiming to develop a framework for regional cooperation and national level implementation to address the challenges of land, housing and civic amenities for sustainable human settlements.

Globalization, urbanization and revolution in information and communication technologies are sweeping across the world, including the Asia-Pacific region. We are passing through one

of the most challenging periods in history. Time and distance, the handicaps of the past, are losing meaning. Economic integration, flows of technology, capital and people, and spread of knowledge across national boundaries have opened new vistas of opportunities for countries. They have also created new challenges such as poverty and slums.

The Asia Pacific region is characterized by the dynamics of growth, rapid urbanization and growing poverty. As regards economic growth, the region is fairly diverse with varying levels of development. Though some countries in the region have witnessed high economic growth, others remain at moderate to low levels of progress.

As regards India, we embraced a path of economic reforms and liberalization over the last one and a half decades. Today we have the fourth largest GDP in the world in terms of purchasing power. Economic growth has been nearly 8% per annum in the last few years. The country has done exceptionally well in certain areas such as IT and IT-enabled services. India is now seen as a major player in the knowledge economy. Levels of foreign direct investment, foreign exchange reserves, domestic savings and investment rates are at all time high. We are now aiming at a growth rate of 9% in the next five years.

Increasing urbanization is emerging as the most pervasive and dominant challenge for the region. Cities and towns are centres of agglomeration economies, investments, technology, innovation, economic growth and tertiary jobs. Their contribution to countries' GDP is immense. They are reservoirs of skills, capital and knowledge and are hope of millions of migrants from rural hinterland and smaller settlements.

However, they are increasingly faced with negative consequences such as polarization of population in large cities, high density, slums and squatter settlements, acute shortage of housing and basic civic amenities, degradation of environment, traffic congestion, pollution, poverty, unemployment, crime and social unrest.

According to UN estimates over 40% of urban population of Asia and Pacific countries lives in slums. If no ameliorative action is taken, it is apprehended that the global slum population would reach 1.4 billion by 2020 with a majority from the Asia-Pacific region. One out of every 2 persons in urban areas would be living in slums. In India, nearly 61.7 million urban people live in slums and smaller settlements which constitute over 21% of the urban population. This conference, therefore, must work towards developing strategies for housing and slum-free human settlements.

Growth is a means to generate employment, eradicate poverty, hunger and homelessness. It is an instrument for improving the standard of living of the masses. Efficiency and equity are complementary, not contradictory. However, balancing economic development with redistribution is the key challenge. The issues of human settlements are intricately connected with issues of equitable and inclusive growth and environmental sustainability.

We need to adopt innovative planning and management approaches proactively to address the issues of housing, civic services and urban poverty. If urbanization has to act as a positive force in economic development, we must aim at an urban and regional planning system that is inclusive and takes into account the needs of the poor and informal sector.

We must realize that cities are not simply about space, they are about people, their quality of life, the future of their children and the hopes and aspirations of their families. The slum dwellers in many countries, including India, live in unhygienic conditions with lack of access to decent housing, drinking water, sanitation, health care and education. These issues need to be addressed.

India has taken considerable steps to reduce poverty and improve the living conditions of slum dwellers. The percentage of population below poverty line has gone down from 55% in 1973-74 to 26% in 1999-2000. For urban areas, the percentage is reduced from 49% to 24% during the same period. While the performance is impressive, there can be no complacency in matters relating to poverty. The Planning Commission of India has recently prepared the Approach Paper to 11th Five Year Plan covering the period 2007-2012 and we propose to reduce poverty by 10 percentage points and move towards Faster and More Inclusive Growth.

The United Progressive Alliance (UPA) Government in India is very concerned about the plight of the people living in slums and squatter settlements. For the first time through its National Common Minimum Programme (NCMP), the Government has committed itself to urban renewal with emphasis on social housing, inclusive city growth and slum upgradation and development. Government of India has launched the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM) last year for a focused approach towards housing, slum development and basic services to the poor. The Mission aims to bring about mandatory reforms both at state and municipal levels to

improve basic services delivery and ensure security of tenure to the urban poor. It will be implemented over a period of 7 years with US \$12.5 billion as central grant which will leverage state share, institutional finance and beneficiary contribution.

The issues of shelter, basic amenities and employment facing the urban poor, need to be addressed in a holistic manner. These are inter-related and call for a participatory approach based on the good governance paradigm. We should enhance participation, accountability, transparency, equity and efficiency in civic administration and move to a regime of effective local self-government that is centered on the people. I am happy to note that this conference is going to focus on pro-poor urban governance as the central theme.

Through this conference we hope to identify the strategies for turning the urbanization challenges into opportunities for development, particularly by consolidating integrated approaches to housing and human settlements with focus on the poor. We should discuss and share experiences of design and implementation of sectoral public policies in areas of housing and poverty alleviation and develop a uniform mechanism for monitoring progress on the Millennium Development Goals and the Habitat Agenda.

As you are aware, the conference scheduled for 4 days has two segments for two days each. The first segment beginning today is the expert group meeting which will be devoted to the deliberation by the senior and high ranking officials of the participating countries. The second segment on 15-16 December is devoted to Ministerial meetings in which the Ministers of Housing and Human Settlement from the

participating countries will deliberate on various issues and adopt a framework on Sustainable Housing and Human Settlements in Asia-Pacific region by the member states for action.

I notice that the level of participation is fairly high and diverse. Senior functionaries from various Asia Pacific Countries have come together to share global experience. This learning exercise will reach to different parts of the region and strengthen our common action agenda for development of sustainable human settlements in the region. I am sure the representatives of Asia Pacific region will take full advantage of their participation and help identify strategies for housing and basic services delivery while promoting sustainable and slum-free cities. I extend my best wishes to all of you for a fruitful participation in the Conference and hope that you will enjoy your stay in New Delhi.

Thank you.

Jai Hind!