

**Introductory Remarks to the 1<sup>st</sup> Session of the Executive Board of UN Habitat**

**Zainab Hawa Bangura**

**UN Under-Secretary-General and Director-General of UNON**

**Wednesday, 7 April 2021 - 9:00AM EAT**

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**Excellencies, Members of the Executive Board, Dear Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,**

1. In my capacity as the Director-General of UNON, it is my great pleasure to warmly welcome all of you on behalf of my sister and friend, Executive Director Maimunah Mohd Sharif, to this first session of the Executive Board of UN-Habitat for the year 2021.

2. This year marks the second virtual session of the Executive Board, and I am pleased to see you all here. Last June, when I addressed this forum we were in the very early days of this devastating global pandemic. Many among us lost family, friends, colleagues, and others whom we held dear. The world was in the heat of an unimaginable and unrelenting crisis, and it was extremely difficult to see the light at the end of the tunnel.

3. Fortunately, with the uptake by more and more of our global citizens of the various measures recommended by those in the health and science fields, and with the extraordinary advent of new vaccines, the tide is finally beginning to turn in many countries, although it is clear that we are far from being out of the woods. Here in Kenya we are now experiencing a third wave of infections. Between January of this year and now, our total cases in the UN family in Kenya rose from 455 with 5 deaths, to 791 cases with 9 deaths. We have an ever-mounting number of new cases, and hospital bed availability in Nairobi has fallen precipitously.

4. During 2020, UNON strived to minimize the impact of the pandemic on our staff, contractors, and associated personnel, and on the delivery of services to clients. We implemented and managed a reduced staff presence on the UN Complex, including by supporting productive work from home arrangements; we acquired and ensured the availability of high quality quarantine, isolation and treatment facilities for UN personnel and their families; we maintained business continuity in key areas such as payments, payroll and recruitment, to UNON's global clients; we strengthened UNON's Joint Medical Services to ensure a strong COVID-19 health

response, including the provision of psychosocial support; we facilitated a strong and coordinated inter-agency response to the pandemic; we designed and implemented a clear back-to-office strategy; we planned and implemented a vaccination programme in partnership with, and made possible through, the extraordinary generosity of our host country; and, we provided clear and regular communications to UN personnel. To support the intergovernmental process, heavily impacted by the lockdown of the UNON complex, UNON has, since June 2020, made available to all its main clients, three Remote Simultaneous Interpretation platforms. Member States are offered training at every meeting using Remote Simultaneous Interpretation.

5. And as you may know, we also partnered with the Government of Kenya and The Nairobi Hospital to build, equip and operate a COVID-19 treatment facility. This facility has saved, and continues to save, many lives. As expected, the majority of these lives have been Kenyans, but since opening in November 2020, the UN-Nairobi Hospital Treatment Facility has treated more UN COVID-19 medical evacuees than any other facility or country. As of today, 7 April 2021, there have been approximately 90, from as far away as Nepal and Afghanistan. The facility has received the most seriously ill and medically-challenged patients, making Nairobi the most important UN medical evacuation centre in the world.

6. Finally, many of you have wondered when we would return to the UNON Campus. In this regard, we are guided by the pandemic. In February of this year UNON had finalized and issued guidelines pertaining to a series of physical and human resources measures we had taken to facilitate a partial return to the campus, including revised office layouts, strengthened cleaning and catering protocols and new staff rotation arrangements. We had also identified and trained a cadre of COVID-19 monitors to ensure social distancing and contact tracing, and we were ready to facilitate the activation of Phase 2 of our return to premises plan, which allows for a gradual increase in personnel on site, from the 10% currently present, to a maximum of 40%. Unfortunately, at around the same time, the infection rate started to rise again and in line with our COVID-19 strategy document, which is modelled on that of the other headquarters duty stations, our inter-agency Crisis Management Team took a decision to await a sustained decline in cases and a return to a positivity rate of below 5%. In short, we are ready and when the virus allows us, and we can ensure the safety and protection of all delegates, staff, contractors, and associated personnel, we will be back in the Complex.

7. I wish you an excellent outcome to your deliberations, and may they meet the challenges of this unprecedented moment in which we all find ourselves. Thank you.