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Excellency,

I am writing to seek the support of your Government in a matter of vital importance to the human rights of people across the planet, and, indeed, to the planet itself.

In 1992, Member States adopted the landmark Rio Declaration. The Declaration was remarkable in many respects, not least for its integrated approach to economic development, social development, and environmental protection. The logic of this integrated approach has since been globally embraced, and the integrated wisdom of Rio has spawned countless important developments in the years that followed.

But the Rio Declaration was celebrated by the international community for another reason as well—it was *thoroughly infused with human rights considerations essential to sustainable development*. Its 27 principles put human beings and their right to a healthy and productive life at the centre of concerns for sustainable development. It specifically invoked the right to development, called for action to reduce disparities in standards of living, affirmed the role of women, indigenous peoples and local communities in sustainable development, and called for the protection of people living under repression and occupation. It emphasized the meaningful participation of people, called for access to information, and to remedies and redress. It addressed liability for perpetrators, compensation for victims, and legal development to ensure extra-territorial accountability. And it called for the use of impact assessments to avoid harm in the first place. In sum, the Rio Declaration integrated human rights in its approach to sustainable development.

I believe that, twenty years later, the peoples of the United Nations have a right to expect an outcome at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) that moves the world forward- rather than backward- on these essential commitments. Like the Secretary-General, I am firmly committed to a successful outcome at Rio. And I am convinced that success will depend both on the soundness of the vision contained in the outcome document, and on the breadth of the constituency that embraces it and commits to its implementation. For both reasons, including clear and explicit human rights provisions will be essential.

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To all Permanent Missions in New York and Geneva

There are many good reasons for this, most of which have become increasingly self-evident through the events unfolding in recent years from the streets of the Arab Spring, to the forests of the Amazon, and beyond. The lessons are clear: strategies based on the narrow pursuit of economic growth without due regard for equity and related environmental, social, and human rights considerations will both fail in their economic objectives, and risk damaging the planet, and the fundamental rights of the people who live here. Incoherence between international human rights standards, environmental strategies, and economic policies can undercut all three. The logic of integration—the logic of Rio—is unavoidable.

Without explicit human rights safeguards, policies intended to advance environmental or development goals can have serious negative impacts on those rights. Thus, technocratic processes have excluded women from decision-making, economic and social inequalities have been exacerbated (and, with them, societal tensions), indigenous peoples have seen threats to their lands and livelihoods from some emission reduction schemes, scarce food-growing lands have sometimes been diverted for the production of biofuels, and massive infrastructure projects have resulted in the forced eviction and relocations of entire communities. Simply put, participatory, accountable, non-discriminatory and empowering development is more effective, more just, and, ultimately, more sustainable.

As such, I am appealing to all Member States to fully integrate key human rights considerations in the Rio+20 outcome document. At Rio, Member States should commit to ensuring full coherence between efforts to advance the green economy, on the one hand, and their solemn human rights obligations on the other. They should recognize that all policies and measures adopted to advance sustainable development must be firmly grounded in, and respectful of, all internationally agreed human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the right to development. To these ends, all actors, in both the public and private sectors, should exercise due diligence, including through the use of human rights impact assessments. Particular care must be taken to prevent and remedy any negative impacts on the human rights of vulnerable and marginalized groups, including indigenous peoples, minorities, migrants, persons living in poverty, older persons, persons with disabilities, and children. The empowerment of women, the protection of their rights, and their meaningful participation in decision making must be assured.

States should resolve to work to advance a human rights-based approach to the green economy, based on the principles of participation, accountability (at the national and international levels), non-discrimination, empowerment, and the rule of law in green economy efforts, and to pursue a model of economic growth that is socially and environmentally sustainable, just and equitable, and respectful of all human rights. And explicit attention should be given to protecting the human rights to food, to water and sanitation, to health, to housing, to education, and to participation in public affairs, in the context of a green economy.

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Thus far, Excellency, I regret that these considerations have not been well-reflected in the evolving “zero draft” negotiating text for the Rio+20 outcome. As the negotiating process is advancing, and the Conference will convene in a few months’ time (20-22 June, 2012), the urgency of the matter has become apparent. Concerted efforts on the part of all delegations committed to human rights and sustainable development, and to the success of the Conference in Rio, will be required. Accordingly, I would be most grateful for the kind consideration and support of your Government.

For your further information and assistance, three documents are attached to this letter. The first is a summary of key human rights considerations for Rio+20 prepared by my Office. The second is a joint statement recently issued by 22 Human Rights Council special procedures mandate-holders calling for the further integration of human rights at Rio. Finally, I attach a resolution adopted by consensus at the Human Rights Council at its most recent session, calling for the participation of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights at the Rio+20 Conference, “in order to promote a human rights perspective.” To these ends, I will attend the Conference in June, together with a delegation from my Office.

Excellency, we have entered the 21st Century carrying with us many of the challenges of the century we left behind, from wide-spread poverty, to environmental degradation and climate change, to gross violations of human rights, to brutal conflict. But we also enter this new age with reason to hope that progress is possible on each of these interrelated fronts. New technologies are changing the way we communicate, the way we cooperate, and the way people relate to each other, to their governments and to international institutions. A growing consensus is emerging on the urgency of remedial action to confront- and reverse- ecological damage. Global mobilizations of civil society are helping to create more participatory and more just societies. And a shared understanding of the multifaceted nature of poverty, and of the imperative of human rights-based approaches to development, are changing the way we do business in our collective mission to create a world free from fear and want. A strong outcome at Rio, seamlessly integrating the environmental, social, economic, and human rights elements of sustainable development, will do much to help us advance that mission.

Please accept, Excellency, the assurances of my highest consideration.

Navanethem Pillay
High Commissioner for Human Rights