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The Escazú Agreement: towards environmental justice for all

SPEECH DELIVERED VIA VIDEO MESSAGE

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EVENT: High-Level Segment of the First Conference of the Parties (COP) of the Escazú Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters

Today is a historic moment for Latin America and the Caribbean. The first Conference of the Parties of the Escazú Agreement marks a step change in dealing with the triple planetary crisis of climate change, nature and biodiversity loss, and pollution and waste. The conference marks a step change in building a healthy environment for more peaceful, inclusive and sustainable societies. The conference marks a step change in protecting those who protect the nature upon which we all depend.

But this is not just a historic moment for the region. This is a historic period – for the region and for the world. Historic in the sense that what we do over the next few years can change the course of human development. We face, in essence, a simple choice. Do we ignore the warnings of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and other bodies and keep polluting our way to short-term prosperity as the planet warms and nature dies? Or do we finally tackle the triple planetary crisis head on and secure the natural world so that its benefits may be shared with everyone?

We have already made the right choice in words. But we have not shown this in deeds. In this year, the fiftieth anniversary of the birth of the environmental movement, we must act in the Stockholm spirit and secure our future.

The Escazú Agreement is one pathway to the action we need. The agreement explicitly guarantees everyone's right to live in a healthy environment. Escazú is the first environmental agreement that contains an explicit reference to environmental defenders. But let us not underestimate the scale of the task ahead. There is a long way to go before words become action – particularly when it comes to environmental defenders.

Yes, the agreement is a step towards creating a conducive environment for environmental defenders to freely exercise their rights. And it is encouraging to see that several states in the region have already taken steps in this regard. Yet civil society actors and environmental defenders still face discrimination, harassment, threats, intimidation, attacks and killings.

We have also seen worrying signs of the dismantling or hampering of the exercise of the rights to freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly. We have seen repressive measures to silence critical voices and control access to information.

Reversing this trend isn't just about protecting environmental defenders. Reversing this trend is about protecting ourselves. Areas managed by indigenous peoples and local communities – who make up a large percentage of defenders – have been consistently shown to suffer less degradation. The world needs this nature intact and doing its job of regulating the climate and hosting biodiversity so we can meet the Sustainable Development Goals. This is why UNEP is so committed to working with States, the

Economic Commission of Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), and defenders themselves to make Article 9 of the Escazú Agreement a reality.

So, dear friends, I congratulate the 12 countries of the region that are Parties to the Agreement. My special thanks go to Ms. Alicia Barcena, the former Executive Secretary of ECLAC. Her leadership was pivotal in bringing us to this point. We at UNEP look forward to working with Executive Secretary ad interim Mr. Mario Cimoli.

You have come far to reach the point of holding the first COP. But now is the time for full and meaningful implementation of the agreement and its provisions. Now is the time for more states to ratify the agreement. Now is the time for every one of us to do everything we can, through this agreement and every international deal on the environment, to make peace with nature.

Thank you.