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**Global Wildland Fire Summit  
Sydney, 3-6 October 2003  
Opening Address by Jan Egeland,  
UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs  
(Delivered by Juan Carlos Brandt, Director UNIC Sydney)**

**Wildland Fires – a Growing Environmental, Economic, and Humanitarian Problem**

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I would have very much wished to be with you today as the subject is of crucial importance to our work. Unfortunately, previous commitments have prevented me from being here in person.

We need few reminders of the terrible damage that outbreaks of vegetation fires can cause. In the Australian summer of 2002-3, one of the worst fires in the country's history occurred in Canberra, causing widespread destruction to literally hundreds of homes. This year fires of equal scale and ferocity also broke out across the European and North American continents in the course of a northern hemisphere summer heatwave.

The incidence of extreme wildfire events is increasing throughout the world, with adverse impacts on economies, livelihoods, and human health and safety that are comparable to those associated with other natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods, droughts and volcanic eruptions. Many fires are the result of communities' increasing vulnerability due to growing populations, economic and land-use pressures.

Fortunately, the international community has made great strides over the past decade and has shown itself both willing and able to engage international cooperation to reduce the negative impacts of wildland fires. To cite a few of our achievements to date:

- Wildland fire science and new technologies, particularly space-borne remote sensing systems, have contributed significantly to a better understanding of the impact of wildland fire on humanity, ecosystems and the functioning of the planetary system.
- Many countries have signed bilateral agreements signalling their willingness to cooperate on wildland fire management along common borders and to provide mutual assistance in the large fire emergencies that occur. Similarly, we have seen a significant increase of technical and scientific cooperation projects.
- The capacity of developing countries to handle the sustainable management of vegetation resources, including fire management is being strengthened, and rural populations in countries are increasingly involved in community-based fire management projects.

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Many of you will already know that the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR) has a Working Group on Wildland Fire, which reports to the Inter-Agency Task Force for Disaster Reduction. One of the principal functions of this Working Group is to advise the UN system on all matters related to the reduction of the negative impacts of wildland fire on human societies and the global environment, as well as foster inter-sectoral cooperation within and among the UN, international partners and civil society.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

In the course of your discussions at this Summit you will have occasion to touch on the issue of *reducing risk and vulnerability* to wildland fires, and seek to identify appropriate mechanisms to improve global communication and knowledge sharing on wildland fire management. You will also be called on to commit yourselves, in principle, to take all necessary steps to manage wildland fuels and fires and to adhere to a five-year global plan of action which we hope will result in positive outcomes in the reduction of the damage caused by wildland fires.

Your discussions will contribute to the current review of the Yokohama Strategy and Plan of Action for a Safer World that was adopted in 1994 at the First World Conference on Disaster Reduction. At the Conference, concrete actions on disaster preparedness, mitigation and prevention were outlined at the international, regional, national and local scale. The ISDR Secretariat has since been requested by the UN General Assembly to review the implementation of Yokohama Strategy, identifying good practices, remaining gaps, emerging issues, and calling for global action in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Governments, practitioners, civil society, UN and international organisations are invited to participate in the review process through their involvement in meetings such as this Summit. An opportunity to increase political and financial commitment for disaster risk reduction will take place at the Second World Conference on Disaster Reduction – to be tentatively held in Kobe and hosted by the Hyogo Prefecture in January 2005 – where the results of the review and a Programme for Action for the period 2005-2015 will be presented, and endorsed.

Lastly, as today is the 8<sup>th</sup> of October, the day we celebrate the UN International Day for Disaster Reduction, let me quote from UN Secretary-General's Kofi Annan's message to commemorate the Day:

“Natural hazards are a part of life. But hazards only become disasters when people's lives and livelihoods are swept away. The vulnerability of communities is growing due to human activities that lead to increased poverty, greater urban density, environmental degradation and climate change.”

“On the International Day for Disaster Reduction, let us remind ourselves that we can and must reduce the number and impact of disasters by building sustainable communities that have the long-term capacity to live with risk.”

Ladies and gentlemen, with these words, I wish you every success in your deliberations. Thank you.