

Opening remarks of the UNEA President, H.E: Ms. Leila Benali
26th February 2024, 10.00 a.m.

Excellencies,

**Distinguished delegates,
Colleagues,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

It is my great pleasure to welcome you all to the sixth session of the United Nations Environment Assembly.

I acknowledge all the hard work undertaken to get us to where we are today.

I want to thank the Executive Director, Ms. Inger Andersen, and the very capable and efficient UNEP Secretariat, for preparing for this important gathering.

Thank you to His Excellency Firas Khouri, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan in Nairobi and the Chair of the Committee of Permanent Representatives, for steering us through the Open-ended Committee of Permanent Representatives. My thanks to my colleagues, members of the UNEA and CPR bureaux.

You are all working long hours to move the negotiations forward. Thank you all!

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Established in 2012, the United Nations Environment Assembly is the world's highest-level decision-making body on the environment. Its doors are open to all.

Five successful sessions have gaveled over 90 resolutions that have spurred action on critically important issues, from biodiversity and health,

to financing for development, plastic pollution, water resources management, sustainable consumption and production, and protecting the environment in areas affected by armed conflict and disasters, amongst many others.

Once again, the international community is looking to us to deliver.

This is our moment to advance the global environmental agenda, to build on the pledges made in previous sessions and in the different environmental processes that occur between the sessions of the Environment Assembly.

We are living in a time of turmoil. And I know that in this room, there are people who are, or who know, those deeply affected by this turmoil. Our response must demonstrate that multilateral diplomacy can deliver.

And today, and at this UN Environment Assembly, we must accelerate multilateral action to strengthen the environmental foundation of sustainable development.

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Time and again history has reminded us that in times of turmoil and conflict, humanity has dug deep and changed course. Indeed, there can be no better example of this than the United Nations, founded on the ashes of the Second World War.

At that time, the global community made a commitment to the world that there must be a global body dedicated to working towards peace, security, and economic development. An organization that would uphold human rights, dignity of all, and equal rights of men and women, and of nations large and small. Over the last decade, the UN Environment Assembly has lived up to the spirit of the UN charter, bringing together 193 Member States, intergovernmental organizations, the broader UN system, civil society groups, the scientific community, and the private sector to shape global environmental policy and decision-making.

As we meet here in 2024, we must be self-critical and work towards inclusive, networked and effective multilateralism that can make a tangible difference to people's lives.

We must also include voices beyond government, of youth, indigenous peoples and local communities, by focusing on issues of gender and human rights, and leaving no one behind.

In the early days of the United Nations, the issues of sustainability and the environment were not at the forefront of the international agenda. Today these issues are front and center of our work.

Why? Because it has finally become clear to us that the environment is the very foundation of our economies and societies. As Executive Director Andersen has reminded us time and again, we can no longer pollute our way to wealth. Time is running out to tackle the not only the three planetary environmental crises of climate change, nature and biodiversity loss, and pollution and waste, but all the global environmental challenges including desertification and drought among others.

Global temperatures smashed records in 2023. The climate emergency continues to ravage countries and people around the world – impacting the poorest and most vulnerable the hardest.

Hundreds of thousands of species are careening towards extinction, while over 3.2 billion people are affected by land degradation.

And millions of people are dying each year from exposure to pollution and chemicals.

This is why at this UN Environment Assembly we will advance action on key environmental issues.

We begin this Assembly with 19 draft resolutions submitted by countries and two draft decisions covering environmental priorities.

During this Assembly we will aim to drive united, inclusive, and multilateral action that addresses every element of the three planetary environmental crises as one indivisible challenge.

And we must do so with the full engagement of civil society, private sector, youth, and other key stakeholders to ensure a whole-of-society approach.

Together, we will focus on uniting the world under the banner of environmental action and will put our minds and energies on key solutions during this critical period for people and planet.

It is our time to deliver.

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Excellencies, Colleagues, Friends,

We have before us a heavy agenda with many important decisions to make. I urge all of us to engage positively and openly in the deliberations. We have an immense responsibility ahead of us.

I count on each and every one of you to ensure that our discussions over the next five days take place in a spirit of understanding and compromise, commitment and urgency. We have only one blueprint for our one Earth – it is up to us to deliver a cleaner, greener and safer future for all people. Let's continue our vital work. I very much look forward to engaging with you this week.

Thank you.