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Canada prepares for Habitat, UN Conference on Human Settlements

Barney Danson, newly appointed Minister of State for Urban Affairs, announced on September 24 the creation of a national committee to coordinate Canadian public participation in Habitat, the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements, which will be held in Vancouver in June 1976.

Announcement was made during a news conference in Ottawa to welcome Enrique Peñalosa, United Nations Secretary-General for Habitat, making his first official visit to Canada.

Heading the Canadian national committee is Senator Sidney L. Buckwold, a former Mayor of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan; Dr. Hugh Keenleyside, of Victoria, British Columbia, is honorary chairman.

The committee will advise the Minister in the development of a Canadian position on human settlements for presentation at the Vancouver conference and to stimulate Canadian awareness of human settlements problems.

As host country, Canada will welcome more than 5,000 delegates, observers, other participants, and media representatives to Vancouver in June 1976.

Goal of Habitat, which grew out of the Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, in 1972, is to encourage governments to focus on the questions of human settlement and on actions to deal with them. It will be the largest and most significant United Nations conference ever held in this country.

Reason for conference

World population is expected to reach 6.5 billion within the next three decades. This growth will bring problems in many areas, but the problems in human settlements will be compounded by the rapid urbanization which is occurring in all nations. The effect on urban areas will be almost explosive, and governments must plan now if they are to cope successfully with the physical and social problems which will arise. There is general agreement that nations should share their experiences as they seek solutions.

To carry out the host responsibilities of the Government of Canada, a host secretariat has been established within the Department of External Affairs. Executive responsibility for the national hosting arrangements rests with this secretariat, which has a management organization covering installations, communications, conference services, design development and public affairs.

Canada's own participation in Habitat is being organized by a secretariat established in the Ministry of State for Urban Affairs. Officials of that Ministry will be holding discussions with Mr. Peñalosa on the planning for Canada's contribution to the substance of the conference. In Vancouver, Mr. Peñalosa met with members of the host committee, including representatives of the British Columbia Government and the City of Vancouver, and he visited the proposed site of Habitat.

Address by Habitat Secretary-General

At a lunch given in his honour in Ottawa on September 24, Habitat Secretary-General Enrique Peñalosa said that Canada was "setting a magnificent example" as host country to the Vancouver conference and as a participating government. He said he would like to have a copy of a National Film Board film on the evolution of the Canadian program "to show other governments how you, as host country, see your role".

Passages from Mr. Peñalosa's address follow:

"...We must accept that the human race is in a stage of jarring transition. We are rushing toward the day when nearly all our species will live in a previously unknown state of compaction. And we must very quickly devise physical, social and environmental responses to that condition.

"This will be the central issue, the backdrop to all themes and subjects that we will take up at Vancouver. This is the other face to the problem of population, and the two together are the fundamental challenge in the world today.