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Habitat: UN Conference on Human Settlements – Minister encourages participants

Urban Affairs Minister Barney Danson left Canada February 19 on an 18-day mission to key African countries and the Middle East to encourage participants in the United Nations Habitat Conference at Vancouver May 31 to June 11 to pay special attention to aspects of human settlements that can be solved despite political differences.

"I will express Canada's hope and optimism that Habitat will demonstrate that nations, irrespective of the differences that divide them politically, can find a common ground through the United Nations to deal with very relevant issues of common human concern," Mr. Danson said before his departure.

After a stop-over in Milan, Mr. Danson was to visit France, Senegal, Kenya, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Israel, returning to Canada March 9.

As well as meeting the ministers and senior officials who will lead their national delegations to the Habitat Conference, Mr. Danson said he wanted to learn at first hand the priority given human settlements problems and actual or proposed solutions in each country.

Reasons for Habitat

Habitat, an outgrowth of the UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm in 1972, is expected to be the largest UN conference ever held, with over 140 nations participating. It is the first UN conference to take place in Canada.

Because it has been estimated that the world population will double in the next 30 years – an addition of 3.5 billion people – 3,500 cities of one million population will have to be built. Today, fewer than 300 cities exist with a population of one million each.

New people will require 600 million housing units – more than there are in the entire world today. Yet, according to the World Health Organization, more than one billion people did not even have safe drinking water by the end of 1970, much less a settlement adequate for all human needs.

Canada will require 40 cities the

size of Halifax, Nova Scotia, or eight the size of Vancouver, to accommodate the net population growth of eight million expected within 30 years.

Cities, towns and villages, particularly in developing countries, are already failing to provide basic facilities and services. Other human settlement problems – unemployment, pollution, congestion, slums, squatter settlements, inadequate transportation, social alienation and crime are increasing throughout the world.

A different type of conference

The Habitat conference will attempt to find solutions to such challenges. It will differ from other conferences in its emphasis on treatment rather than definition of problems. Each nation will come to Vancouver to teach and to learn and, it is hoped, ready to implement the solutions best suited to its settlement problems by the time Habitat is over.

A major innovation during the meetings will be the use of some 200 film and audio-visual presentations to illustrate what governments throughout the world are doing to improve urban and rural community life.

Habitat Forum, a meeting for representatives of non-governmental organizations will also be held in Vancouver during the same time as the Conference, but it will start on May 27. It is expected to draw at least 10,000 people to a beachside former air force base four miles from Vancouver, which is being converted, largely by volunteers, into a conference and exhibition site.

In an address to the second session of Habitat's preparatory committee on January 21, Mr. Danson stated:

"...Out of Habitat must come a real commitment, first by national governments and then by the world community as a whole, to meet the needs of our poorest people. Millions of the less-advantaged are still to be found in the industrialized nations and Habitat should persuade governments to improve their condition. But the

