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Secretary-General

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**EMPOWERING PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES STRENGTHENS HUMAN
SOLIDARITY FOR EVERYONE.**

**SECRETARY-GENERAL TELLS REHABILITATION INTERNATIONAL WORLD
CONGRESS**

Following are UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's remarks, as prepared for delivery, to the 22nd Rehabilitation International World Congress, in Incheon, Republic of Korea, 30 October:

Before I begin my remarks I want to say a few words about the storm now hitting the east coast of the United States. I am closely monitoring the unfolding developments in New York City and elsewhere, and my thoughts are with all those who are enduring a very difficult night through a treacherous storm. The damage has affected millions of families, including the United Nations family.

I also want to express my deepest condolences and solidarity with the people of Haiti and elsewhere in the Caribbean who suffered through the fury of Hurricane Sandy, which claimed dozens of lives and caused untold damage.

I am receiving regular reports on the situation from the United Nations team in New York who are in touch with local officials. I plan to be on the ground tomorrow. I know that you join me in wishing all those who have been in the path of this storm our thoughts at this difficult time.

I am pleased to meet with all of you on an issue that is very close to my heart. The United Nations has a long history of advocating for the human rights of persons with disabilities. Rehabilitation International has always been one of our most important partners in standing for their empowerment and inclusion in society. I am proud to work closely with all of you.

Yesterday, I gave a speech about the power of sports to unite people, communities and nations. When I was preparing for that talk, I started reading letters from young people to Olympic athletes. They were published as part of a contest run by a United Nations agency.

I was especially moved by a letter from a young girl to a Paralympic gold-medal champion. The girl wrote, "Watching as you overcome the difficulties of life, reaching for new victories and new heights in sports, I derive strength and inspiration."

I share this story because I want to focus today on how much persons with disabilities can contribute to society. Imagine how much stronger the world would be if the rights of the more than 1 billion persons living with disabilities in the world would be respected, protected and fulfilled. Only when they have the opportunities they deserve, can they generate ideas, products and inspiration for millions of other people.

More and more Governments understand this. We have made remarkable progress in recent years — at least on paper. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has marked a major step forward. The Convention embodies a paradigm shift, from a

charitable or medical approach to disability to one which is firmly rooted in human rights. It establishes that discrimination against any person on the basis of disability is a violation of the rights, inherent dignity and worth of the human person. And it obliges States parties to ensure and promote the full realization of all rights of persons with disabilities in all aspects of society and development.

This treaty is the ideal. However, there is a major challenge in bridging the gap between policy and practice. There are now 125 States parties. I call on all countries to take action to make the goal of the Convention a reality on the ground.

The reality is persons with disabilities are more likely to live in poverty. They face many obstacles, including stigma, invisibility and abuse. They have a harder time in school and a tougher time finding jobs. They are denied their rights to vote, move freely, enjoy social protection, access justice and choose medical treatment. Women with disabilities face particular challenges and need to be empowered. Disabled children especially need our protection and support.

We all know this situation has to change — for persons with disabilities and for our world. When we empower persons with disabilities, we strengthen human solidarity for everyone.

The Convention calls for breaking down barriers: physical obstacles, negative attitudes and institutional red tape that affect persons with disabilities and their families. This is a matter of human rights and a requirement for reaching the Millennium Development Goals.

While we are racing to achieve the Millennium Development Goals, we are also looking beyond the 2015 deadline. We have an historic opportunity now to create a post-2015 development agenda that incorporates the rights, concerns and contributions of persons with disabilities.

The “Rio+20” United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development highlighted the link between disability and achieving equitable and inclusive progress. And the Rio+20 Outcome stresses the importance of accessibility for persons with disabilities in order to achieve the future we want.

The digital revolution has opened new possibilities for persons with disabilities. We have to ensure that access for them includes technological access.

This meeting is an important step on the road to the future.

I congratulate the Government of Korea, the Asia-Pacific disability community and Rehabilitation International for proclaiming the third Asian and Pacific Decade of Persons with Disabilities for the years 2013 to 2022. I especially express my warm appreciation to the persons with disabilities who have been involved in these events. They should always be leaders in our campaign for the equality and dignity they deserve.

I thank the Republic of Korea for hosting a series of high profile events on disability at this time, including the 2012 Asia-Pacific Disability Forum Conference and the 2012 Asia-Pacific Disabled People’s International Assembly. These are important gatherings.

I hope these meetings will feed into the work of the United Nations and that all of you will engage closely with us. Next year, the United Nations General Assembly will hold a high-level meeting on disability and development. This is an opportunity for all countries to renew their resolve to empower persons with disabilities. This is a chance for all countries to ensure that they enjoy the full range of human rights — civil, cultural, economic, political and social — on an equal basis with others. Together, we must take concrete action to achieve a just and

equitable society and development for all. I count on Rehabilitation International to be part of our global effort to advance this cause.

Last week we celebrated United Nations Day with a beautiful concert at the United Nations. Our star performer was the legendary singer Stevie Wonder. He is a global superstar — and a United Nations Messenger of Peace. Stevie Wonder devotes a great deal of his work at the United Nations to promoting the rights of persons with disabilities. He is blind — but he has profound vision.

Stevie Wonder once said: “I know what I can do. I know what I have — but what about those persons that don’t have?” I am really moved by his compassion.

The spirit to care for others should guide us. This is a rewarding way to live — and the sure path to our common goals.

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