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KEYNOTE ADDRESS

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Asia-Pacific Regional Preparatory Meeting for the
Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration

Opening Ceremony

6 November, Bangkok

Ms. Shamshad Akhtar, UN Undersecretary-General and Executive Secretary of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific,

Distinguished co-facilitators,

Mr. Bill Swing, Director General of IOM,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to be in Bangkok today, for the final preparatory meeting organized by the UN Regional Economic Commissions. I thank the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) and co-organizing agencies and also all the distinguished participants for joining this timely discussion.

While the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development fully integrates international migration in a global development framework, the New York Declaration took that commitment one step further by recognizing that no one state alone can deliver on better governing migration, in a manner that is people-centered, cooperative and forward-looking, with the aim to develop a global compact for safe, orderly and regular migration to be adopted in 2018.

Today, I am looking forward to hearing the experiences from the Asia-Pacific region. I know that much of your work through ESCAP, as well as through the regional consultative processes, such as the Bali and Colombo Processes and the Abu Dhabi Dialogue, will have much to contribute to our discussion.

Allow me to highlight a few issues that I consider particularly important for the development of the global compact.

Migration has been a positive force for millions of people: migrants themselves, those they leave behind and for the new communities who host them. Yet perceptions of migrants as a burden or even as a threat, have risen, in some countries, from the fringes to the mainstream. The result is both rising intolerance and an environment in which vocal anti-migration sentiments fester.

We cannot expect all sectors of public opinion to change dramatically in the short timeframe given for the adoption of the compact, but we depend on your leadership to anchor the debate in reality, not in myths, stereotypes and misperceptions.

One aspect of that reality is that most migration takes place within the same region. In 2015, the Asia Pacific region hosted 60 million migrants from around the world, while also being a region of origin for over 40% of all international migrants. Most of these were South-South migrants, remaining within the region, or migrating to nearby countries in the Gulf Cooperation Council.

Migration itself is complex, not just based on one motivating factor or one sole experience. While many people move through free choice, others are compelled to leave their homes. Many find themselves in acute need of assistance and protection during a long journey to an uncertain destination. The experience for states is also multifaceted: increasingly many states are origin, transit and destination countries simultaneously and need to adjust their national policies accordingly.

The many challenges of migration – inclusion in host communities, irregular migration, smuggling and trafficking, displacement induced by climate change – are inextricably linked, as are the opportunities that come from labour migration, student migration or migration to reunite families. The effects of these challenges and opportunities are felt by migrants, host communities and governments alike.

Let us look together at one particular area, labour migration, which I understand is the predominant form and motivation for migration in your region.

As you well know, when grounded in sound policies that are well planned, gender-responsive and rights-based, labour migration can deliver significant benefits and opportunities for migrant workers, states and host communities as well as for countries of origin. It can contribute to economic growth, create jobs and promote innovation. I understand that remittances totaled almost \$269 billion for this region last year, and for some countries it accounted for a significant portion of their GDP.

While labour migration is a strong motivating factor, we must recognize the critical difference between regular and irregular migration. Except in some sought-after, mainly highly-skilled professions, many labour migrants are pushed towards irregular migration channels. In the absence of regular pathways, the informal economy in destination countries will remain a significant pull factor, providing irregular migrants with jobs that ensure their survival despite their irregular status.

Many of them work under exploitative conditions, face barriers to access fundamental services, and are unable to seek protection from the state due to their migratory status. But it is important to keep in mind that these migrants are neither a driver, nor the unique source, of labour for the informal economy.

Yet, efforts to curtail irregular migration tend to focus overwhelmingly on repressive border governance measures including criminalization of migrants, detention, or fast-tracked returns. These policies have shown themselves to be ineffective, often only intensifying migrant vulnerabilities, pushing them further underground and eroding the rule of law - exactly the opposite effect from that intended.

States can mitigate irregular migration by creating more legal pathways, especially by means of labour-related migration opportunities. Barriers to regular migration, that do not respond to labour market realities, will likely result in greater irregular migration, resulting in negative outcomes for all concerned: migrants, states and host communities.

At the same time, we must acknowledge that the supply of labour from countries with large working age populations may very well exceed the demands of other countries, even those with aging populations, and acknowledge the sovereign prerogative of states to return irregular migrants. But safe, orderly and regular access to jobs in the formal economy of all countries experiencing labour shortages in any sector should go a long way in reducing recourse to irregular migration.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I believe that the global compact can have a profound impact for many: it will encourage states to cooperate on a whole range of international migration issues, thereby facilitating safe, orderly and regular migration, not curtailing it.

In doing so, particular attention should be given to the need for robust social inclusion programmes that focus on benefitting all members of the community, and not encourage -- even unintentionally -- suspicion and discord between newcomers and hosts.

A new cooperation framework at the global level therefore, should incorporate both the experiences and lessons learnt from the existing regional mechanisms – such as from ESCAP as well as from the numerous regional consultative processes - and the renewed commitment for cooperation on key migration issues in the multilateral setting.

Thank you.