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Remarks

Secretary of State John Kerry
At a Working Session on Resilience and Food Security in a Changing Climate

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SECRETARY KERRY: Thank you very, very much. My apologies that we are beginning just a couple of minutes late, and we're delighted to welcome everybody here. Let me just say at the outset I had the chance to speak here earlier today on civil society, but I want to reemphasize the degree to which President Obama and the whole Administration are genuinely very excited about these several days. This summit has been long in the making. It is an historic gathering. And we want it to be as substantive, as productive – in the end, as agenda-driving as possible. And in the end, of course, that will depend on all of you and the participation of the next days.

But I want to begin by thanking all of their excellencies who are here – presidents and prime ministers, foreign ministers, others representing more than 50 countries – mostly I would say to you heads of state, but for a few who are unable to make it for a number of reasons. We are distinctly pleased to be able to welcome you here to one of the signature events, really, of these next three days. And it's on a topic that means a great deal to many of us on a personal level in the Administration. I know John Podesta, who will be taking part momentarily, Raj Shah, and others who are deeply, viscerally connected to this issue and all that it entails.

But it also affects every person on earth in very real ways. Climate change, food security, and resilience are interrelated challenges that we all need to be thinking about as we plan for the future, and I'm delighted that so many of you are here to think about this and to sort of take idea from laboratory to shelf, and in some cases augment what is already on the shelf.

So let me start by thanking all of the remarkable leaders who have agreed to serve on the panels coming up. Each of them are true leaders in their sectors or their countries, and you will judge that for yourselves. But particularly, we are grateful to several heads of state and the African Union chairperson herself, leaders from the private sector, in addition from the nonprofit world – all of the partners that we really need if we're going to be able to achieve what we want to achieve and to get this right.

I want to especially thank the two moderators of the panel – the Administrator of USAID Raj Shah, who I've already mentioned, and John Podesta, likewise. Finally, thank you to the Second Lady of the United States, Jill Biden, who will join us here a little later to share some of her thoughts.

When you talk about food security, it doesn't take very long to have the name, Norman Borlaug, come up. Norman would have been 100 years old this year, and he dedicated his entire life and career to feeding the world's hungry. He won a Nobel Prize for his work. And he pursued that path for one reason. As he put it, "You can't build a peaceful world on empty stomachs and human misery," pretty simple.

It's been five years since Norman passed away, and you don't have to be a Nobel Laureate to understand that the statistics around hunger today are nowhere near what he hoped for. Every day, 8,000 children die because they don't have enough to eat. They don't have a healthy, nutritious diet – 8,000 children every single day. Around the world, one in eight people suffers from chronic hunger. And in Sub-Sahara Africa, that number, regrettably, is one in four.

So looking to the future, it's only going to become more difficult to bring these numbers down, if you look at the realities of what is happening. For one thing, over the next several decades, the population of Earth is expected to grow and it's expected to grow quickly. The 7 billion people that we're focused on feeding today is going to become more than 9 billion people by 2050 – 35 years. And more than half of this population growth, I would add, is expected to occur in Africa.

But on top of that, the growing impacts of climate change are going to put extraordinary stress on our ability to be able to produce the amount of food that we need to be able to feed those increasing numbers, and, I might add, to feed from increasing numbers from increasingly – from agricultural locations that are increasingly under greater stress and duress.

Now, one thing to understand here this afternoon: We're not talking about some distant future. We're not talking about some pie-in-the-sky unproven set of theories as they were in the earliest days of population growth or other challenges that we face. The impacts of climate change are already being felt everywhere in the world, from the Arctic to the Antarctic and everywhere in between and around. And they're only going to get worse unless we are successful next year in President Obama's and many other leaders' goal to go to Paris and get a global agreement with respect to the reduction of greenhouse gases.

All you have to do is look at the extreme conditions that farmers are dealing with around the world: hotter temperatures, longer droughts – just look at California, for our instance, and other parts of the world – unpredictable rainfall patterns. I just came from Delhi where they're having torrential rains in some parts way above the levels they've ever had, and as – India as a whole, 25 percent below their average. Intense wildfires, and you can run the list; I'm not going to run it today. But there's a legitimate question that has to be asked, which is: How do livestocks thrive or even survive under those conditions? What happens if the great rivers of the Himalayas that literally are the life source for so many billions of people on both sides begin to be diverted and dry up because the glaciers are disappearing and the snow levels change?

All you have to do is look at our ocean. The same carbon pollution that drives climate change is literally changing the ocean's chemistry. And we just had two days of a major conference in the State Department on the subject of the oceans. That is making it more and more difficult for species like clams and mussels to exist in its waters. Crustacea, all crustacea, are affected by increased acidity.

Between ocean acidification, over-pollution – excessive pollution and overfishing, the three great challenges of the ocean, our fish stocks are in serious trouble in almost every fishery of the world. And what will that mean for the 3 billion people who today exist on seafood as their major source of protein? In some African countries, the importance of fish to nutrition and to their economies is particularly high. In Sierra Leone, 70 percent of the animal protein people absorb comes from fish. In Ghana, it's 51 percent. In Gambia, 49 percent. So what will people do if those fish stocks change because the ecosystem itself begins to collapse?

But the intersection between climate change and food is not just about quantity. We're now seeing that carbon pollution is also making some of the food that we do grow less nutritious than it used to be. For example, rising carbon dioxide levels translate into lower levels of zinc and iron in wheat and other cereal grains. This means that people not only struggle to have enough food to eat; they may also suffer from a so-called hidden hunger; they're eating, but they're still deficient in certain micronutrients that keep them healthy.

President Obama has made clear how committed he is to cutting carbon pollution and reducing emissions, and this Administration has taken unprecedented, unilateral administrative steps in order to try to keep faith with those promises. But we also have to make sure that we are asking ourselves: On top of our efforts to deal with the causes of climate change, how do we help ensure that farmers, fishermen, and the billions who depend on the food that they produce are able to endure the climate impacts that are already being felt, let alone yet to come?

The answer is clear: By focusing our efforts on the intersection of climate and food security, by adopting

creative solutions that increase food production and build resilience to climate change, all the while cutting greenhouse gases. That's how you do it.

And now, another part of this story is that certain agricultural processes can actually release carbon pollution and help contribute to the problem in the first place. It's a twisted circle, always complicated. But we also know there are ways to change that. For example, rather than convert natural areas to new farmland, a process that typically releases significant amounts of carbon pollution, we can instead concentrate our efforts on making existing farmlands more productive.

Now this is an area where African leaders have actually been ahead and significantly ahead of the game for some time. More than a decade ago, the AU launched the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Program, which requires all member-states that sign on to create and implement national, effective food security investment plans. These national plans are by nature created to cater to each country's specific needs, abilities, and limitations, and they're actually the basis for the work that we do with African nations through various joint initiatives that we're currently engaged in.

This year, the AU went even further, not only by naming 2014 the year of agriculture and food security, but also by launching the Malabo Declaration. This declaration requires all signatories to pursue investments that protect people and ecosystems. And each of these countries have signed on to an agreement to ensure that over the next decade or so, at least 30 percent of all African farm, pastoral, and fisher households should be resistant to climate and weather-related shocks.

Now, these are challenges that have frankly been on the top of President Obama's agenda since he first came into office. I know that they were there the day that I sat down with him to discuss becoming Secretary of State. And he told me that food security was one of those looming issues that he really wanted to make a difference on and address. And he's proven as much by spearheading a number of initiatives in order to do just that.

Feed the Future, his signature initiative, is supporting farmers in 19 different countries, including 12 in Africa, by investing in various ways to make the food that they farm more plentiful, more accessible, and more nutritious.

Another important initiative that President Obama launched is the New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition. At the 2012 G8 Summit at Camp David, several African heads of state, corporate leaders, and G8 members pledged to help raise 50 million people out of poverty in Africa by 2022 by increasing private investment in agriculture. After two years, the New Alliance now includes 10 African countries, 180 African and international companies, and it has leveraged 8 billion in planned private investment in agriculture. Commitment to this partnership is strong, and we are looking forward to announcing more updates throughout this week.

These initiatives are actually really making a difference, my friends. But in light of the enormity of this challenge, they are not going to be enough by themselves. We need more governments, more businesses, more research institutions, more civil society, more people all over the world focused on improving agricultural productivity, on investing in innovation and technology like seeds that withstand drought and floods, and on ensuring the world's agricultural sector is operating as sustainably as possible.

That is the idea behind the Global Alliance for Climate-Smart Agriculture. Now I know that governments and other partners around the world are still in the process of deciding exactly what this alliance is all about; what's it going to look like? But I encourage all to get on board, particularly countries and organizations represented here at the African Leaders Summit. This is a priority for UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, who will hope to formally launch this initiative at the Climate Summit in New York this September. And today, I'm happy to announce that the United States intends to formally sign on.

I know that several other – (applause) – I know that several other African countries here are prepared to make similar announcements, and we are working together to produce a declaration announcing our mutual intent to join this effort. Let me add that we are planning to leave this document open until the end of this

leaders summit, and we invite as many other leaders as possible to join us in committing to the Global Alliance for Climate-Smart Agriculture.

So obviously, we have to continue to foster efforts like this. This is a gigantic initiative. And all of us who have had the privilege of traveling somewhere in the world, almost anywhere, have seen too many pockets of poverty, including right here in the United States – too many people still struggling, too many kids going to bed at night hungry, and perhaps in some cases never waking up to see the next day. We also have to continue to innovate, and we have to, above all, cooperate. That's how we're all going to help end hunger and malnutrition and cut carbon pollution and improve the resilience of our farms, our forests, our fisheries. And if we do that, we will live up to our responsibilities for the future that help empower another generation that follow to do the same.

Now, I think that all of us know what Norman Borlaug believed is absolutely true: Whether you're talking about countries in Africa or right here in North America, when people don't have to worry about where their next meal will come from, they have a greater ability to fulfill their dreams and become constructive, contributing citizens of the world.

Like so many of the global issues that we deal with, what we have here is a question of political will. We have solutions, but none of these solutions will implement themselves. The will of governments, of companies, of civil society, of research institutes and international organizations – all of these are the key. We know the challenges. We know what it's going to take to address them. It's a matter of all sectors coming together, applying their energies and efforts to make sure that we make the right decisions, the right commitments, so that millions of families living in poverty – really, an anachronism – it's so contrary to everything that's possible when we look at the affluence in so many parts of the world. We can change this. We can set goals and we can pledge money, but unless people's lives have improved, unless we buy into the realities of what's staring us in the face in terms of better agriculture and better food production, the better distribution we will fail.

So that is exactly what this portion of the African Leaders summit is all about, and let's get started. We have a terrific panel. It's my pleasure to turn it over to my friend and my colleague and a great advocate for this, a passionate advocate for this, the Administrator of USAID Raj Shah. Thank you. (Applause.)

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