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**Opening Statement by
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TO THE 18TH SESSION OF THE UNITED NATIONS REGIONAL CARTOGRAPHIC
CONFERENCE FOR ASIA AND THE PACIFIC
Bangkok, 26-29 October 2009**

Thank you, Mr. Chairman
Distinguished Delegates and Observers,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is with great pleasure that I welcome you, on behalf of the United Nations, to the Eighteenth United Nations Regional Cartographic Conference for Asia and the Pacific. We are very pleased to see so many professionals gathered here, representing countries from all over the world as well as international organizations and associations. I want to acknowledge at this juncture the special contributions of the Permanent Committee on GIS Infrastructure for Asia and the Pacific (PCGIAP), especially its President, Mr. Greg Scott, its Vice-President, Mr. Komaki Kazuo, its Secretary, Mr. Li Weisen, and its secretariat. Their tireless efforts in the preparation of this Conference had made this meeting a true success. I would also like to acknowledge the services provided by our host the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific.

The Seventeenth Conference, held in Bangkok more than three years ago, adopted resolutions and recommendations which focussed on the role of geo-spatial technologies and applications and the use of spatial data in addressing global, regional and national issues, including disaster management and humanitarian needs. Our conference this year is dedicated to a related and equally important theme: “Spatial Enablement and the Response to Climate Change and the Millennium Development Goals”. The focus at this conference – as a review of the agenda will show - is on how spatial information can contribute to addressing the major challenges of our times. This is an important issue for discussion and the geographic information professionals have to make the case that their work is just as important as other professional groups.

I believe that this Conference, which brings together specialists from Asia and the Pacific and from other parts of the world, provides an excellent opportunity to address this issue by exchanging experiences on how geographic information has been used effectively in dealing with climate change, disaster management, poverty reduction and other major development challenges, and exploring new ideas of how the role of geographic information can be enhanced even further.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

At the outset of this conference, allow me to highlight three particular aspects, which will help address the issues on the current agenda, namely (i) the importance of data integration and spatial data infrastructure, (ii) the opportunities and challenges of the rapidly evolving IT-environment and (iii) the importance of coordination of geographic information management at the global level.

(i) Spatial data infrastructure and data integration

Virtually all the information required to address the current global issues, including population growth, climate change, food crisis, disaster management, land degradation, water resources, and energy shortages has a spatial dimension. Using this central organizing principle of geography – ‘that place matters’ - geospatial technology has transformed the way information can be presented for societal benefit and for the promotion of social, economic, and sustainable development.

The rapid integration of geospatial data with a variety of statistical data and their analysis and modeling has indeed increased the understanding of the dynamics of socioeconomic, demographic and environmental structures and helped generate more accurate, timely, and unbiased information for better decision-making. For example, this integration has proven to be critical to achieve improved operational readiness and responsiveness to disasters. By using satellite imaging, scientists, demographers and other experts can compare images and statistics taken before and after earthquakes to estimate the amount of aid to be allocated to inhabited areas. As every event happens somewhere in the world, geographic information provides an ideal base for integrating data across sectors: demographic, economic, social, environmental, and other areas.

It is becoming clear that the applications of these technologies and the ensuing geographic information management are of strategic importance. The biggest problem, however, is the large number of players involved in geographic information management, including data producers and suppliers, software vendors and data users at national, regional and global levels. To improve governance, there is need for a common framework of spatial data - a Spatial Data Infrastructure (SDI) - which brings together data, metadata, producers, users and tools, as well as necessary policies and organizational structure that are interactively connected in order to increase the usability of spatial data for many applications in an efficient and flexible way.

A growing body of practical experiences reveals that building and developing a national spatial data infrastructure will better facilitate availability and access to spatial data for all stakeholders - policy makers, planners, and managers as well as private organizations and individuals. This will help everybody, to be better prepared and to proactively respond to a development challenge, emerging issues and disasters, rather than reactively rush to collect the necessary information and data.

(ii) The opportunities and challenges of a rapidly evolving IT-environment

The recent technological developments, giving us access to terabytes of geographic information, which can be visualized in 2- and 3-dimensional images, are revolutionizing the ways in which civil society is utilizing this type of information. Web-based mapping tools, particularly geo-portals, have

proven to be key drivers of change, as they offer free and user-friendly access to high-resolution satellite imagery in unprecedented detail to the public at large. As an example, I would like to mention Google Earth, which has put Geographic Information Systems on our desks, and popularized the way satellite imagery can be viewed almost effortlessly, and without the traditional upfront cost of data purchase and specialized software.

In just a few decades, the user-panorama for geographic information has, therefore, changed dramatically. In addition to the professional tools that continue to be used by Government and public and private institutions to develop geographic content, execute spatial analysis and perform modelling, simple cartographic tools are now being used by hundreds of millions to use and compare geographic data. And there is no end of this trend in sight.

This rapidly evolving IT-environment poses challenges, but also offers opportunities to address the development challenges mentioned above. In this context partnerships between the public and the private sector are of particular importance.

(iii) The importance of coordination of geographic information management at global level

Lastly, please permit me to inform you that we at the United Nations are committed to supporting the strategic use of geographic information, not only at national and regional levels but also at the global level, as we recognize that geographic information transcends national boundaries. We recognize the need of countries, and particularly developing countries, for the full utilization of the potential of geographic information and resources. In this context, The United Nations will continue to support the countries in their national SDI efforts and to encourage initiatives and actions at the regional and global level that allow the development of common frameworks and tools, such as geodetic reference systems and standardized data and naming conventions.

We particularly recognize the need expressed by many countries for a global coordination that would enable them to effectively manage and utilize geographic information in tackling today's global issues and crises, to share best practices (particularly in legal instruments), to develop models and technical standards for the building of Spatial Data Infrastructures, to develop interoperability of systems and data, and to establish mechanisms, such as web-based geo-portals, that guarantee that geographic information is easily and timely accessible.

I can assure you that the United Nations is willing to take up today's challenges that require a global, in addition to a regional, "cartographic" focus and the need to realign "cartographic" work with the management of geographic information and spatial data infrastructure (SDI). A mechanism for global and better coordination between United Nations Regional Cartographic Conferences and their regional Permanent Committees on SDI and other various inter-governmental and international organizations active in the geographic information field is becoming crucial. We understand that countries, intergovernmental organizations and international agencies, including the United Nations Statistics Division, should indeed work together not only to build capacity and strengthen the institutions required to address geographic information management problems, which are very crucial, but also to adopt an action-oriented approach that can deliver and produce tangible responses to the emerging issues in the world.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

The world today is facing many daunting and interrelated problems: climate change, natural disasters, disease outbreaks, population migration, financial and food security crises, social conflicts and others. These complex problems are global in nature and affect different regions, rural and urban areas alike, requiring coordinated efforts, more innovative and sophisticated approaches, as well as effective tools to ultimately guide our way to sustainable development.

With advances in information and communication technologies driving the creation of new businesses and catering to a largely extended base of users, the cartographic/GI community is facing some crucial challenges: how to harness the enormous potential of geospatial technologies and go beyond local and national level applications to regional and global applications, and how to achieve an integrated management of geographic information in support of social, economic and environmentally sustainable development

I believe that this conference provides a good opportunity to review and assess the different existing geospatial methods and technologies, understand how they can support our overall sustainable development goals, and identify appropriate solutions to reap the benefits of these challenges.

I look forward to your guidance in going forward.

Thank you.