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ETHIOPIAN MILLENNIUM TREE PLANTING CAMPAIGN LAUNCHED IN BENISHANGUL GUMUZ REGION

UNICEF PLEDGES SUPPORT TO PLANT 20 MILLION TREES THROUGH YOUTH INVOLVEMENT

ASSOSSA, ADDIS ABABA – 6 June, 2007: The Ethiopian Millennium Tree Planting Campaign was officially launched in Ethiopia's Benishangul Gumuz Region yesterday at a ceremony held on newly designated parkland on the outskirts of the regional capital Assossa.

"Benishangul Gumuz was once densely forested, but nowadays the climate is changing because of deforestation," said Yaregal Ayesheshem, Regional President. "Deforestation is also causing flash-flooding which damages crops and property. The youngsters here have a main role for making a better future for this country through planting trees and taking care of them."

UNICEF has pledged to contribute to the planting of at least 20 million trees in support of Ethiopia's plan to plant as many as 60 million trees as part of Ethiopian Millennium Celebrations. UNICEF believes it is helping to achieve its core commitments to children by contributing to environmental protection efforts to ensure a sustainable future.

"When we asked children and young people 'how would you like to celebrate the new Ethiopian Millennium?' said Bjorn Ljungvist, UNICEF Representative, "they replied, 'we would like to build a better future for this country and we feel that the best way to do this is to plant trees to preserve the world we live in.' I can't think of a better place to celebrate World Environment Day 2007 than in this beautiful region."

It is estimated that close to 40 per cent of Ethiopia was covered by forest at the turn of the 20th century. Today, that number has dropped to below 3 per cent.

Benishangul Gumuz is one of the remote and underdeveloped regions of Ethiopia. Its under-five mortality rate is above average at 157 per 1000 live births (compared to the national average of 123). The lack of adequate infrastructure and capacity in Benishangul Gumuz is affecting all essential child services. Deforestation has also taken its toll, jeopardizing livelihoods of thousands of families and hindering development.

The event was attended by H.E. Ms. Kirsti Aarni, Finland's Ambassador to Ethiopia, as well as the deputy head of the Spanish Development Cooperation both of whom are presently touring UNICEF-supported sites in the region.

All dignitaries were invited to plant a tree in commemoration of the event. The region expects to plant at least 1.5 million trees in time for New Years Day 2000 of the Ethiopian Calendar, which this year falls on 12 September 2007. The trees are indigenous species found in Benishangul Gumuz Region, which borders Sudan in Western Ethiopia.

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The delegation proceeded to visit UNICEF-supported activities in Sherkole Woreda, 20 kms from the Sudan border, including the Enhanced Outreach Strategy initiative which brings key child survival interventions to children under-five years of age and pregnant and lactating mothers. They also viewed insecticide treated net distribution which has reached 80 per cent of Sherkole with the support of UNICEF.

For more information, please contact:

UNICEF Communications

Dr. Kerida McDonald, Chief Communication Cluster
Tel: (251-11) 551 51 55, (+251-11) 544 44 00
email: kmcdonald@unicef.org

Indrias Getachew, Communication Officer, Tel: (251-11) 551 51 55, (251-11) 544 43 64,
(251-91) 125-40-18, e-mail: igetachew@unicef.org