

Mr. Barack Obama
President of the United States of America

December 17, 2009

Dear Mr. President,

Now is the time to give hope more than a voice. As you depart for the UN Climate Summit in Copenhagen, I feel compelled to express my hope and desire for the role you will play when you join the other heads of state in reaching an agreement to avert catastrophic climate change: the role you must play in keeping hope alive for many millions of people around the world.

My Name is Kumi Naidoo, I am the International Executive Director of Greenpeace, I am also chair the Global Coalition for Climate Action (www.tcktcktck.org) and serve as a co-chair of the Global Call to Action Against Poverty (www.whiteband.org). But, most of all, like you, I am a global citizen. I am also a child of Africa.

Like so many people around the world, I was uplifted during your presidential campaign. I had great hope as I listened to you speak to the perils of global warming, and about the promise of a clean energy economy. I was delighted by the promise that the US would return to multilateral engagement. After so many years of denial and inaction by the Bush Administration, you restored my hope that a fair, ambitious and legally binding climate agreement was possible. My hope that a deal which would banish the specter of catastrophic climate change could be struck. I believed and still believe you could be the leader to ensure that happens.

As a child growing up under apartheid, I learned that it is possible for a leader seeking change to keep hope alive. I also learned that, sooner or later, transformative leaders must make difficult decisions. Tomorrow you will face such a decision. Your choice could change the course of history.

As you well know, no region or nation is immune to the ravages of climate change. Melting glaciers, blazing forests, and acid seas are some of the well-documented ecological impacts of climate change. But too often, we lose sight of the inextricable link between the environment and how real people are affected. It is now estimated that some 300,000 people, mostly the poor and politically disenfranchised, die every year in our warming world.

Water, food, and habitable land are becoming scarcer, compounding human suffering and multiplying political tensions. The latest figures suggest that if we don't act now, as many as one billion people will be uprooted by climate impacts by mid-century.

That will inevitably lead to insecurity and conflict. Something an already unstable world can ill-afford. Already climate impacts, such as the drying up of Lake Chad, one of the largest inland seas in the world, have exacerbated the tragedy in Darfur, where water scarcity and competition for land have destroyed the lives of millions. Indeed, climate change arguably constitutes the biggest threat to peace. The costs of inaction will be measured in human lives, and you well know that women and children, as always, will bear the biggest burden.

The poor and voiceless will suffer most; they will be hit hardest and fastest. The unfairness of that pains me. They are the least responsible for causing climate change.

At home, you have taken important steps to make up for lost time by enacting policies which will simultaneously limit greenhouse gas pollution and put Americans to work. From afar, it appears that the ambition of these plans has been stifled by powerful fossil fuel and energy corporations. To date, your negotiators have only agreed to a paltry provisional cut in US emissions of 3 percent on 1990 levels by 2020 – dangerously below the 25-40 percent cut the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change says is necessary to avert catastrophic climate change. The US has also failed to put a long-term financial assistance package on the table. Long-term cash injections are desperately needed to allow poor countries to adapt to the climate impacts they are experiencing and will experience. They need money to invest in clean energy sources as they develop their economies.

I feel a responsibility to inform you that this lack of ambition has profoundly discouraged many of the same people who were so energized by your promise of hope and pledges to rejoin the international community in this common struggle.

I cling on to hope, because as you have so vividly demonstrated, anything is possible. The prospect of personal leadership at the negotiations allows me to retain some 'audacity of hope' that you will have both the courage and the vision to make history.

This is not a simple political crisis: it is a moral crisis. I want to continue to believe in you Mr President. I appeal to your humanity – please don't condemn the peoples of low-lying island states and the world's most vulnerable countries to uncertainty. Do not let them be wiped off the map.

You have given the world hope that we will finally put this crisis behind us. You have the opportunity to turn hope into action and into reality.

Those from the most vulnerable states face a clear and present danger, but let us be clear, all of the world's 6.8 billion people will suffer from the consequences of unchecked climate change. They need a leader with the courage and vision to act. I pray and hope you are such a leader.

I end by reminding you of something you said often during your campaign. You frequently invoked the powerful words of Martin Luther King: "The fierce urgency of now".

Sadly, according to the science the urgency of now has become even more fierce. I humbly appeal to you to reject the voices of short-term interest, of political expediency and of compromise.

Listen instead to the call of history. Listen to the voices of those most at threat. Listen to the voices of future generations, of our children and grandchildren. Of your children. Of your grandchildren, as yet unborn. Then, please, take the action that you know is needed.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kumi Naidoo". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Kumi Naidoo

Executive Director
Greenpeace International