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## **PRESS RELEASE**

### **Cape Town to host Ministerial Summit on Earth observations**

### **Global monitoring system will provide universal access to comprehensive database on environmental change**

**Cape Town, 22 November 2007** – Ministers and officials from 72 national governments, the European Commission and 46 international organizations are meeting in Cape Town, South Africa, from 28 to 30 November to advance their shared vision of a Global Earth Observation System of Systems (GEOSS) designed to help humankind live in harmony on an increasingly stressed planet.

Concerned that climate change, deforestation, desertification, water scarcity and other human-induced pressures risk causing an environmental collapse, governments are collaborating through the Group on Earth Observations (GEO) to secure comprehensive and near-real-time information about changes in the Earth's land, oceans, atmosphere and biosphere.

This will be achieved by interlinking the world's ocean buoys, weather stations, satellites and other Earth observation instruments into one fully coordinated system. The resulting "system of systems" will enable countries to reduce their vulnerability to disasters and environmental change while improving their management of agricultural, energy and other natural resources.

"Five years after the World Summit on Sustainable Development met in Johannesburg, governments are following through on the pledge they made there to improve the systematic observation of the Earth," said Mr. Thabo Mbeki, President of South Africa, which is hosting the conference.

"At a time when the international community is developing a new agreement on climate change and addressing growing concerns about resource depletion and natural disasters, the need to strengthen our scientific base for decision making has never been more urgent. The Global Earth Observation System of Systems is an excellent example of how countries around the world, from both North and South, can pool their meagre individual resources to serve the global public," he said.

The implementation of the Global Earth Observation System of Systems is following a 10-year plan that runs through 2015. Participating governments and organizations are contributing to this voluntary global project by expanding and interlinking their respective observation systems. In Cape Town they will present 100 "early achievements" as evidence of the progress that has been made over the past two years.

"The Global Earth Observation System of Systems will revolutionize the way decision makers craft both national and international policy. This emerging public infrastructure could prove as essential to economic and social progress in the 21st century as new transport and communications systems were in the 20th," said GEO Director José Achache.

The early achievements range from the development of new databases for minimizing deaths and damages from hurricanes and other disasters to sophisticated decision-support tools for managing natural resources sustainably. For example:

- The Governments of Brazil and China are extending their jointly operated remote-sensing service to provide satellite images of Africa free-of-charge to users in that region.
- The Global Wildland Fire Early Warning System project is combining data from a variety of sources with the aim of producing Daily Fire Danger maps for the African continent.
- To fill a major data gap and thus improve seasonal weather and climate forecasting, the Argos project has established a global array of floats that measure ocean conditions and disseminate the resulting data via the Internet within 24 hours.
- Recognizing that Earth observations can provide early warnings of likely epidemics in Africa's "meningitis belt", GEO is helping health experts to integrate user-friendly climate forecasts into vaccination and treatment programmes for meningitis.
- Canada, Mexico and the US have established the North American Drought Monitor to provide comprehensive analyses of monthly drought conditions across the continent. Other GEO members will build on this effort by developing a Global Drought Early Warning System.
- To promote the greater use of solar energy systems, GEO is creating databases that will provide access to information about levels of and variations in solar radiation worldwide.
- The Sentinel Asia project is combining remote-sensing and other Earth observation data in order to improve disaster preparedness and early warning throughout the Asia-Pacific region.
- GEONETCast, a near-real-time delivery system for environmental information, has now attained near-global coverage. The system obtains Earth observations from the numerous land, sea, air and space-based systems that together constitute GEOSS and transmits them via a system of specialized communications satellites to users that lack good Internet access.
- Prototypes of the future GEOPortal have been developed to demonstrate how this "one-stop-shopping" Internet service will soon place vast quantities of data as well as numerous decision-support software tools at the fingertips of policymakers, managers and experts.
- Recognizing the serious challenge of air pollution, GEO is creating a global network of air-quality information systems linking ground- and satellite-based observations with air-quality models in order to improve air-quality forecasts and public-health information.

The Cape Town conference includes a two-day Plenary on Wednesday and Thursday, 28 – 29 September, followed by a one-day Ministerial Summit on Friday, 30 November.

**Note to journalists:** For more information, please see [www.earthobservations.org](http://www.earthobservations.org) and [www.dst.gov.za](http://www.dst.gov.za), or contact Nhlanhla Nyide, Department of Science & Technology, South Africa, at +27 (0)82 871 67 67 or email: [nhlanhla.nyide@dst.gov.za](mailto:nhlanhla.nyide@dst.gov.za), or Michael Williams, GEO Secretariat, Geneva, at +41 22 730 82 93 or [mwilliams@geosec.org](mailto:mwilliams@geosec.org).