

– **Opening Ceremony of ITB Berlin 2017** –

Berlin, Germany, 7 March 2017, 18:00

Address by Taleb Rifai, UNWTO Secretary-General

His Excellency Lieutenant General Dr. Seretse Khama Ian Khama, President of the Republic of Botswana

Ms. Brigitte Zypries, Federal Minister for Economic Affairs and Energy

Mr. Michael Müller, Mayor of Berlin,

Dr. Michael Frenzel, President, German Tourism Industry Federation (BTW)

Dr. Christian Göke, CEO, Messe Berlin GmbH

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen, dear friends,

Guten Abend.

On behalf of the World Tourism Organization, the United Nations Specialized Agency, I would like at the outset to thank ITB for the privilege to join you yet another year.

I would also like to thank ITB for its important and longstanding contribution to tourism development.

Allow me also to welcome Botswana, this year's ITB Official Partner Country, a leading sustainable tourism destinations and an inspiration to all of us.

Dear friends,

We live the worst of times and the best of times!

Times of natural disasters, economic crisis, wars, increasing assaults on human rights, the daily suffering of those obliged to flee their homes, and the slow-burning threat of climate change.

Times when we wake up every other day with the threat of terrorism at our doorstep and the glooming numbers of unemployment.

Times of isolationism and ill-conceived actions like travel bans, which do not lead to increased security but just to growing tension.

Despite all these complex and interlinked challenges, despite acts against the freedom of travel, the power of tourism continues to shine through the darkness.

In 2016, international tourism grew by 4%, the seventh consecutive year at above average rates.

International arrivals surpassed 1.2 billion (1,235 million), bringing benefits to communities, economies and societies all around the world.

And most importantly, despite all challenges, we are living the longest uninterrupted period of solid growth in international tourist arrivals since the 1960.

Dear Friends

As UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has said:

“Beyond the measurable advances that tourism can make possible, it is also a bridge to better mutual understanding among people from all walks of life.”

In a world that seems increasingly short of tolerance and generosity, we should cherish tourism as a precious pillar of peace amongst communities and nations.

Dear friends,

The United Nations well understands the importance of tourism to its core values: social progress, equality and prosperity, peace and human rights.

This is why its General Assembly designated 2017 as the International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development.

This year is a unique opportunity for all of us to come together to promote the contribution of tourism to a better future for people and planet.

We are also shining light on what needs to be done for tourism to fulfil its potential as a pillar of sustainable development.

We must together address three key priorities:

1. Promoting safe and seamless travel

This does NOT mean stigmatizing, oppressing or excluding communities and minorities, by building walls or banning people from travelling, which is bending to what terrorists want – to end a free world.

It DOES mean cooperating to address the security challenges we face without compromising people's ability to travel.

And it means giving the tourism sector and its stakeholders a seat at the table when security related to tourism infrastructure is discussed.

2. Enhancing the role of technology and innovation in tourism

Technology is rapidly changing consumers' behaviour, business models and destination management.

We need to better understand its impact on our sector and maximize the new opportunities we have to improve competitiveness, make travel safer and easier, and manage our natural resources more effectively.

3. Embrace the sustainability agenda

Tourism in Botswana is carried out on an ecologically sustainable basis: local communities must benefit and wildlife conservation is crucial.

We all need to ensure, like Botswana is, that as our sector grows it contributes to the wellbeing of the world and not to its peril.

Tourism must fulfil its responsibility to contribute to all 17 universal Sustainable Development Goals.

Dear friends,

This year is my final year as UNWTO Secretary-General, a position I have been privileged to hold for almost seven years.

But I have been coming to ITB for 18 years and I shall miss it – and you all – very much.

Be assured that I will continue to have utmost faith in our sector as a catalyst for hope and positive change.

This faith is matched only by my commitment to turn this conviction into reality.

In my last year at UNWTO I am very proud and grateful to be celebrating the transformative potential of Sustainable Tourism for Development.

Let us make each of the 1.2 billion travellers an ambassador for peace, tolerance and respect.

Vielen Dank. Thank you.