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### Sustaining the Planet

With the American president a conspicuous exception, leaders from nearly 100 nations will begin assembling next week in Johannesburg to address the future of life on this planet. At the heart of the conference is a formidable if now familiar challenge — figuring out ways to bring economic well-being to billions of people now trapped in poverty without destroying the land, water, air and biodiversity required to sustain life itself.

It will be the third such meeting in three decades, and if the past is any guide, the Johannesburg conclave — known formally as the World Summit on Sustainable Development — will be long on good intentions and short on specific solutions. Even so, it is a meeting well worth having. The Stockholm summit in 1972 inspired the industrialized nations to begin cleaning up their air and water. The Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 produced treaties on global warming and biodiversity that, while vague, officially committed at least the industrialized nations to address two major environmental threats that had long gone unattended. In the last decade these challenges have not receded, while others have arisen.

President Bush's absence is regrettable, and reinforces his well-deserved reputation — flowing in part from his rejection of the Kyoto Protocol on global warming — for indifference to environmental problems and reflexive hostility to multilateral remedies. If anyone can dispel that impression, however, it is Secretary of State Colin Powell, who will lead the American delegation. Though his visit will be brief, Mr. Powell at least shares the view that environmental degradation and poverty can destabilize nations as surely as actual warfare.

There is little doubt that current patterns of development are unsustainable over the long term. As the U.N. secretary general, Kofi Annan, recently observed, fish stocks continue to shrink, tropical rain forests (and associated species) continue to recede, and agricultural productivity declines while the number of mouths to feed grows.

In 25 years, two-thirds of the world may be living without enough water. Meanwhile, use of fossil fuels means increased global warming. Millions die every year from tropical diseases, waterborne germs and parasites and the pollution that results from the unshielded indoor combustion of primitive fuels. Eliminating these diseases must be part of any development program.

Sustainable development may mean higher short-run costs. It can also generate longer-range savings. The Times has reported a large German insurance company's estimate that the consequences of global warming will cost as much as \$300 billion annually by 2050. Health problems arising from poor sanitation, habitat destruction and loss of biodiversity also carry a high economic price. For these and other reasons, the conference's organizers have rejected the notion that nations must choose between economic growth and environmental protection. Both are indispensable.

Mr. Bush's opposition to Kyoto means that global warming will not get the attention it did 10 years ago in Rio. However, Secretary Powell has generally expressed support for Mr. Annan's agenda, and is expected to announce a package of health, environmental and food programs aimed at helping Africa after he arrives. In the conference's aftermath, he needs to go further and lead an effort to reconfigure American foreign aid as a whole to underwrite sustainable development.