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January 9, 2023

The Honorable Ms. Linda Thomas-Greenfield
Ambassador of the United States of America
United States Mission to the United Nations
799 United Nations Plaza
New York, NY 10017

RE: Appointment of United Nations Secretary-General Special Envoy on Vision

Dear Madam Ambassador,

On behalf of Prevent Blindness, and our sight-saving mission, I write today to urge the United States to support an appeal to the United Nation's Secretary-General to appoint a Special Envoy of the Secretary-General on Vision.

Prevent Blindness is the leading eye health and safety organization in the United States dedicated to preventing blindness and preserving sight for more than 115 years. We proudly joined a geographically diverse group of more than 50 UN Member States, nearly 200 non-profit and private sector organizations from across the world, and the Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO) in signing on to this call for a Special Envoy of the Secretary-General on Vision. We urge the United States to support this appeal, the deadline of which to do so is **Friday, January 13th**.

Vision is truly a universal issue. We will all experience a vision issue in our lifetime. Here at Prevent Blindness, we know all too well the toll that vision and eye health problems cost our country. More than 7 million people in our country are living with uncorrectable vision loss, including more than 1 million Americans who are living with blindness. On top of the public health ramifications, this amounts to an enormous economic burden to our country, **with vision loss estimated to have cost the United States alone more than \$184 billion in 2022**.

But these challenges go well beyond our borders – currently 2.2 billion people, including 450 million children, are living with sight loss across the globe. At least 1.1 billion people suffer the consequences of sight loss simply because they don't have access to basic eye care services. This poses a considerable financial and societal burden, costing the global economy over \$411 billion dollars every year in lost productivity. And yet, avoidable sight loss is realistically within our grasp to solve by 2030. A range of feasible and cost-effective strategies are available today and can prevent or treat 90% of sight loss. For many, all that is needed is a simple pair of glasses, a 700-year-old invention.

As you well know, eye health is a cross-cutting development issue which directly impacts 9 of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) established in 2015:

SDG 1 No Poverty: Poverty is both a cause and a consequence of poor eye health. 90% of unaddressed vision loss occurs in low- and middle-income countries, with the poor and extreme poor among the furthest left behind.

SDG 2 No Hunger: Improved eye health can increase household income which in turn reduces hunger. 46% of households moved up an income bracket following cataract surgery.

SDG 3 Good Health and Wellbeing: Eye Health is critical to ensuring good health, mental health and wellbeing. Poor eye health increases the risk of mortality up to 2.6 times and has been linked to depression and other health conditions.

SDG 4 Quality Education: Eye Health has a positive impact on school enrolment, educational attainment, and learning. Glasses are one of the most effective health interventions for children, reducing the odds of failing a class by 44%. Children with vision impairment are 2–5 times less likely to be in formal education in low- and middle-income countries.

SDG 5 Gender Equality: Women and girls are more likely to have sight loss and experience additional barriers to eye care services. 55% of people with vision loss are women and girls, and overall women are 8% more likely to be blind.

SDG 8 Decent Work and Economic Growth: Good eye health promotes inclusive economic growth, employment and improved living standards. Glasses can increase work productivity by 22% and cataract surgery has been shown to increase household per capita expenditure by 88%.

SDG 9 Reduced Inequalities: Poor eye health is driven by inequality. Women, older people (73% of people with vision loss are above age of 50), persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, refugees and internally displaced persons and migrants are among those affected.

SDG 11 Sustainable Cities and Communities: Eye Health is critical to reducing road traffic deaths and injuries. Unoperated cataract can increase the change of a motor vehicle accident by 2.5 times.

SDG 13 Climate Action: Climate change increases the risk of eye conditions and climate emergencies disrupts access to eye care services. The eye health sector also contributes to a global health care contribution of 4.4% to greenhouse gas emissions.

The appointment of a Secretary General’s Special Envoy for Vision would provide a much-needed focal point for cross-sector action and helping to raise public awareness of vision and eye health within our own borders as well as around the globe. The timing is ideal, on the heels of the adoption of the first-ever “Vision for Everyone” resolution at the UN General Assembly in 2021 – of which the US was a supporting member country – and as the international community considers innovative ways to advance the 2030 Agenda and Our Common Agenda. A Special Envoy would support the Secretary General and the World Health Organization to address the intersectionality of vision and ensure this commitment to reach the 1.1 billion people left behind is achieved.

Specifically, the Special Envoy on Vision would:

1. Coordinate a multi-sector response to vision

- **UN Institutions:** Due to its cross-cutting nature, vision often falls between institutional gaps. WHO has provided leadership on vision as a health issue, but such leadership has been absent within the broader UN system. The Special Envoy on Vision would work with the relevant entities of the United Nations system (i.e. UNICEF, UN-Women, UNDP etc.) to address the intersectionality of vision in their policies and programs.
- **Public-Private Partnerships:** Vision demands a cross-sectoral response. Whilst government ownership and action are crucial, eye health cannot be addressed without a major contribution from the private sector. The UN Special Envoy on Vision would help foster and scale up partnerships between governments, the private sector and civil society, ensuring they build synergies with other relevant development issues such as education, gender equity etc. Many of the critical private sector and civil society actors stand ready to work with the UN Special Envoy on Vision office.

2. Mobilize political commitment and action, particularly at the national level with member states:

Vision is not sufficiently prioritized by governments and many fail to recognize the intersectionality of

vision and eye health with other priorities. The UN Special Envoy on Vision would help drive national action by working with governments to hold national policy dialogues and develop integrated strategies on vision.

- 3. Increase global awareness and lead a global campaign on vision:** The Special Envoy would serve as a global advocate and spokesperson for healthy vision. He or she could lead a public campaign to increase awareness of the importance of eye health and bring the voices of those most affected by sight loss, including the most vulnerable groups, to the global discussion. Specifically, the Special Envoy on Vision would proactively work with youth to address the dramatic rise of short-sightedness in young people, affecting their health, mental health and well-being, access to education, employment, and decent work.

The direct costs of the provision of secretariat support and all other logistical costs are to be met from extra-budgetary funding to be mobilized by the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness, the overarching alliance for the global eye health sector with 200 members (including Prevent Blindness) globally for an initial period of three years. Substantive and technical support to the functions of the Special Envoy will be provided by IAPB and the WHO, who see the value and are supportive of the establishment of an Envoy and office.

Since 1908, Prevent Blindness has been a leader in advocating for vision and eye health for those of all ages, backgrounds, and circumstances. Today more than ever we are seeing trends in population growth and demographic shifts that collide with new innovative sight-saving treatments, medical and public health research, and methods of accessing care such as community interventions and telehealth. Our mission to prevent blindness and preserve sight by protecting and enhancing access to vision and eye care through advocacy, education, and empowerment has never been more vital.

As a U.S.-based NGO, and one with a decidedly domestic agenda, we also know far too well that we exist in a global community and have a duty to bring our voice to bear in advocating for vision and eye health for our neighbors across the world. We urge the United States to lead on this vital aspect of global health. Interested Permanent Missions are welcome to contact Mr. Claxton Duberry at the Antigua and Barbuda mission to the UN (Claxton.duberry@ab.gov.ag) to confirm support.

Madam Ambassador, if there is anything we can do to advance your mission's support of this essential appointment and the ongoing work it seeks to accomplish, we stand ready to do so.

Sincerely yours,



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