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**Keith Meredith Johnson
Washington, DC?***

Mr. Ambassador, ladies and gentlemen,

In a few days, the eyes of mankind will be focused on a Nordic city-Copenhagen as the nations of the world gather for a historic conference on climate change. There will be an urgency that is seldom seen at large international conferences as the decisions taken may literally be a matter of life or death for millions of the earth's inhabitants.

"We have the opportunity now to shape our common future and that of generations to come, for the better. Climate change is a terrible threat, but beating climate change is a historic opportunity to turn humanity on to a path of sustainable growth for everyone."

We who make the Caribbean our home have more than an academic interest in the result of this Conference. We fear that failure to reach a satisfactory accord raises the specter of rising sea levels as a result of climate change rendering our island homes uninhabitable at worse and inhospitable at best.

If there is a gallery above the conference in which the ancestors and former architects of this movement sit, there will be a front row seat reserved for a tall, elegant, Jamaican gentleman. As befits an ambassador, he will speak modestly, but precisely and deliberately and tell his colleagues of the part he played at the precursor of this great event. He will speak of his role as Rapporteur-general of the first United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, held in another Nordic city, Stockholm in 1972, when the world's attention was drawn for the first time formally, to the need for man to care for the environment –for man to be a guardian of a patrimony that should be handed on pure and unsullied to future generations. That Stockholm conference saw the beginning of the global debate on climate change, so he will speak knowingly on the subject. And as the great nations speak and hopefully make progress, that gentleman will pay special attention and lean forward as China intervenes, as it was he who successfully negotiated the participation of China in the Stockholm Conference, which marked China's return to the United Nations family.

If the Copenhagen conference is successful next month and the threat of irreversible climate change recedes, we in the Caribbean will chalk up yet another debt of gratitude to that

* Tribute to Ambassador Keith Meredith Johnson, Washington, DC, 28 November, 2009

Jamaican gentleman-Keith Meredith Johnson, ambassador, patriot and public servant extra ordinaire who was there when it all started.

Mr. Ambassador, ladies and gentlemen we have come to celebrate the life of the Honorable Keith Johnson, OJ; CD; FRSS Doctor of laws Honoris Causa of the University of the West Indies, Knight Grand Cross of the Liberian Humane Order of African Redemption and recipient of many other distinctions too numerous to mention here. We have come to reflect on what he has meant to so many and hold up that life as one for which there should be admiration and profound gratitude. The difficulty in eulogizing him is in being selective of the good about which one should speak.

The formal record shows that Keith Johnson was born to Septimus and Emily Adina Johnson in Spanish town in 1921. Like most boys of his day, he attended primary school there. But he would have told you with pride that the most formative years of his life were spent at that venerable institution on North Street, Kingston College, where he came under the influence of the legendary Bishop Gibson. It was there that the blocks of his character were molded and the steel for the crucible of his values was poured. Those who passed through KC in those days wore and wear the purple and white as a badge of honor.

After leaving Kingston College the young Keith Johnson proceeded to Colombia University in New York to read demography-the statistical study of populations, which would have qualified him eminently for the work he carried out in the Population Division of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. This training obviously served him well and his competence in the affairs and workings of the premier international organization would have brought him to the attention of the authorities of a newly independent Jamaica as a fitting person to be the country's first Consul General in New York. He carried out that assignment not only to the complete satisfaction of his national authorities, but also to the benefit of large numbers of Caribbean citizens who speak fondly of his many kindnesses to them.

He progressed in the diplomatic hierarchy and in 1967 was appointed Jamaica's Ambassador and Permanent Representative to the United Nations. But the posting with which most of us here associate him is as Ambassador to the United States and Permanent Representative to the Organization of American States from 1981 to 1991. The life of an ambassador of a small country to a large country cannot be an easy one and there must have been many occasions in which his patience and skill would have been stretched to the limit. I know that there were occasions when negative images of Jamaica threatened to do great damage to its economic prospects. During these and other trying times he may well have comforted and fortified himself with remembering the motto of Kingston College –“fortis cedere, cedere non potest”-“the brave may fall but never yield.

The Gleaner has described him as a diplomat's diplomat, indicating that he had all the qualities that his peers would have ascribed to the ideal diplomat. He was unfailingly affable, always elegant, easy of address, a caring husband, and a kind father and gracious almost to a fault. He had the ability of not letting his having played tennis with a future president affect the discharge of his duties and the observance of the formalities that time and circumstance would warrant. No one would have described him as an extrovert, but that did not mean that he was not a charming and entertaining host as many can attest and that he did not give flashes of a wry sense of humor. I think it was from him that I first heard the oft repeated quote from Robert

Frost describing a diplomat; *“A diplomat is a man who remembers a woman’s birthday but never her age”*. I do not think I had the temerity to repeat to him the quotation ascribed to Adlai Stevenson *“A diplomat’s life is made up of three ingredients, protocol, geritol and alcohol”*.

Ladies and gentlemen, let us remember Keith Johnson, let us spare kind thoughts for his family and let us laud him for his many gifts to Jamaica and the Caribbean. There is no doubt about the breadth of his achievements and the value of his contribution. He is a testimony to the words of another Johnson-Samuel Johnson. *“Few things are impossible to diligence and skill. Great works are performed not by strength, but perseverance.”*

George and Sylvan Alleyne
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