

WORLD COMMISSION ON ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT

Opening Address by

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Mr Vice-Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen,

As Chairman of the World Commission on Environment and Development and on behalf of its members, I wish to express to you personally and to the government and peoples of the Soviet Union our warmest greetings and our sincere appreciation for hosting our seventh official meeting here in Moscow. We are deeply grateful for the co-operation and support extended to us by your government - and the hospitality of the Soviet people. I wish in particular to extend our appreciation to our fellow Commissioner, Academician Sokolov, for his outstanding work on the Commission and for helping make this meeting possible.

We have looked forward with great anticipation to our meeting here in the Soviet Union and to the dialogue we shall be having during the Public Hearings with the representatives from the Soviet Union and other countries in Eastern Europe who are gathered here with us today. We want to thank all of those who will be contributing to our sessions. We have much to learn from their experiences and many questions to pose.

The World Commission on Environment and Development was established by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1983. Our Commission is an independent body, free to address any issue and to present any view and recommendations. We come from all corners of the globe, North and South, East and West. Although many of us are active ministers in government, we serve on the Commission in our personal capacities.

The Commission was created out of a feeling that the present machinery for the management of our small planet was not working as it should, and that it was necessary to rethink the issues from new perspectives. We were mandated to re-examine the critical issues of environment and development and to propose innovative, concrete and realistic action to deal with them.

As many of you know, we on the Commission have made it our policy to visit all regions of the world and to use the occasion of our visits to obtain first-hand insights into the problems facing our planet and the threats to its survival. We have had the unique opportunity of listening to people from all walks of life who have openly shared with us their concerns and hopes for our common future. Our experience has strongly confirmed our view that many of the issues we have been called upon to address know no national boundaries, transcend cultures and touch the lives of all those who inhabit this planet, from the rural pastoralist, to the industrial manager and cabinet minister. Indeed, we have become ever more aware of the intricate web of mutual self-interest which binds us together. It is our common endeavour to achieve a world which is more prosperous and just for all.

I come to you as a neighbour but, in fact, all the Commissioners are neighbours of yours.

For we live in a global neighbourhood in which the earth is united, but the world of mankind is not. The human family has been slow to recognize its global interdependence, slow to learn that we are all simply neighbours.

However, the message is becoming increasingly clear: a doubled population creating a perhaps ten-fold bigger economy based on new industries, agricultural policies and life-styles. Superimposing these transitions one on top of another and compressing them in time onto our finite planet creates one vast "Global Transition" far bigger than the sum of its parts. It is marked by a pace of change, a scale of impacts and degrees of uncertainty and irreversibility unknown to human experience. Consequently, the time has come for taking common action. We have no time to lose. Environmental deterioration is already now affecting not just the quality of life in some localities, it is eroding the potential for development and endangering essential life-support systems on a global scale.

In many developing countries, poverty is presently the principal source of environmental degradation. Poverty-induced environmental destruction is growing in countries throughout Africa, Asia and Latin America, especially in the least-developed rural areas where, in order to escape the disaster of hunger today, the poor must sow the seeds of tomorrow's disasters by over-drawing on forests, soil and water. The most dramatic result of these dangerous trends is increasing desertification, the environmental plague which threatens enormous areas of arable land and pastures.

The human populations at risk, because their lands are turning into deserts, are expected to reach 1.2 billion by the turn of the century - almost twice as many as in 1977. The world's deserts are moving forward at a rate of six million hectares each year - and each year sees the productivity of an additional 21 million hectares reduced to zero.

Another aspect of deforestation and desertification is the extinction of plant and animal species. There is strong evidence that if we continue to destroy our tropical forests and other biologically rich areas we may, over the next decades, witness a mass extinction of species with scarcely a thought for what we are doing. This would be particularly tragic at a time when bio-technology opens up vast possibilities to exploit genetic variability to the benefit of mankind in such vital areas as food production, medicine, industry and energy.

Many other critical survival issues are related to uneven development, poverty and population growth. They all place unprecedented pressures on the planet's lands, waters, forests and other natural resources, not least in the developing countries. The downward spiral of poverty and environmental degradation is a waste of opportunities and of resources. In particular, it is a waste of human resources. What is needed is a new era of economic growth - a growth which is forceful and, at the same time, socially and environmentally sustainable.

Sustainable development will set limits to resource use, yes, but not limits to growth. Sustainable development means the elimination of mass poverty and the assurance of equitable opportunities for all. An essential, but not sufficient condition for providing such opportunities is a rapid rise in per capita incomes in developing countries. We need a revival of economic growth, a reversal of the stagnant and declining growth trends of the 1980s, and a concept of development which must be widened to include environmental concerns.

Look at the developing efforts of the poor countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. What they are really seeking is a sound ecological base for development. But what happens to the ecosystems of these countries is largely determined by world commodity prices, financial flows and the transfer of technology.

We in the industrially-developed world have to accept an obligation to ensure that these international factors help rather than hinder the possibilities for ecologically sound and sustainable development. This must be our duty in order to contribute towards the creation of a human future for all the people of the world. It is our duty, but it is also in our own self-interest. Consequently, commodity prices must be influenced to provide a fair international distribution of income. Official development assistance and private loans and investments to developing countries have to be improved, - both qualitatively and quantitatively. Increased capital transfers must take place in ways that are sensitive to environmental impacts. Sustainability criteria should be an integral part of the financial support. Policies will have to be changed accordingly, both nationally and internationally.

Mr Vice-Chairman, a new era of growth will imply that governments really recognize the environmental issues. They will have to receive far more attention in policy making than in the past, and at the appropriate, highest level.

Most governments now pay systematic attention to the effects of air and water pollution in urban areas and around large industrial complexes - the effects on human health, and on property and ecosystems. Over the past few

years a variety of legal, institutional and technical means have been used to control and reduce and even prevent these effects - the symptoms of resource waste and faulty development policies.

With it, in many countries industry is developing a wide range of low and non-waste technologies that reduces substantially our use of mineral resources, particularly petroleum, per unit of output. As a result, new industries can be both more environmentally efficient and more economically competitive. The industrial enterprises of the future will be those who today recognize that Pollution Prevention Pays.

But only a few countries have so far succeeded in controlling pollution. Not even the rich industrialized countries have managed to deal with the backlog. Most of the world, including the developing countries, have suffered a steady and rapid deterioration of their environment - the resource base for their future development. And, today, all countries are falling behind the new generation of environmental issues racing towards them. Most of them are regional and global in their dimensions and many raise crucial questions of national security and planetary survival.

In October 1985, scientists from 29 countries met in Villach, Austria, to review the latest evidence about carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. They concluded that global climatic change must be considered a "plausible and serious possibility" during the lifetime of our children.

The results of global warming, they warned, could be catastrophic in many regions, affecting the climate, shifting the geography of agricultural production, inundating many low-lying cities and coastal areas, and altering conditions for natural growth and economic activity.

Lately, scientists have confirmed earlier evidence of a large hole in the Earth's protective ozone layer. Discovery of this hole over Antarctica - and indications of similar holes over Europe - have sent shivers through the scientific community. Depletion of the ozone layer, allowing more ultra-violet radiation to reach the earth, could increase skin cancers and reduce the effectiveness of our immune system. It could have adverse effects on crops, plants, on the living resources of the sea - and even on the plankton, which provides the essential base for the sea's food web and its life-support system. If the ozone layer is depleted, scientists know of no human action that can restore it.

Ecosystems know no human boundaries, whether political or administrative. The life-support systems of the earth are shared by all living creatures. All that impinges on them must be a matter for common concern.

Harmful industrial activities are mainly concentrated in the more prosperous countries. But all countries, rich and poor, share the risks. And many of those who share in these risks have little influence on the decision processes regulating such activities. The "lesson from Basle", the fire at the Sandoz chemical plant last month demonstrated how we share the risks and how environmental programmes in one country can be disrupted from one day to the other when an accident occurs in another country.

The starting point for a new international commitment must be the recognition that national decisions have international consequences - and therefore require a measure of international responsibility. The global problems need global answers.



To illustrate this approach we can look at certain aspects of energy use. Nuclear energy is today one of the potential sources for the centralized production of electricity for the future. An expert Panel advising the World Commission noted that nuclear energy is part of the quest for clean power.

But the Chernobyl accident strengthened the view of our Panel that no nation should make decisions about energy matters without careful consideration of nuclear safety issues as they have regional and even global implications. A country may decide that lower safety levels may be tolerated in a nuclear reactor. But if an accident occurs, the radioactive fallout does not respect national boundaries.

After Chernobyl, new agreements were negotiated within the framework of the International Atomic Energy Agency in a remarkably short time - agreements about warning and mutual assistance. The co-operative attitude of the Soviet government during those negotiations made a very positive impression on other participating countries. The new agreements were a step forward. But they can only represent a first step in a new beginning.

Looking at energy policy in general and from a global perspective, we cannot simply consider the production end alone. Energy consumption in itself generates vast quantities of waste products. The smoke from our factories, exhaust fumes from our automobiles, by-products of our power plants - all spew out into the atmosphere. Some of the effects on a local level are now being controlled. As we now see, the regional and global impact is more difficult to contain.

The effects of accumulating acidification of the environment are no longer confined to Europe and North America. Evidence of damage is beginning to emerge from the newly industrialized countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America. Beyond the immediate damage, scientists are expressing a greater fear. Reports show how European soils have become so acid that they liberate aluminium in forms which are toxic to plants. The death of the forests may be the first indication that the soil has tripped over into irreversible acidification. If so, restoration measures may be beyond anyone's economic reach.

Acidification of the environment is a clear consequence of the world's present energy policies. My country and your country, Mr Vice-Chairman, both suffer from the effects. And as you know, these consequences of our energy policies cannot be remedied with the usual tools of environmental policy. It is essential to attack the problems at the source. The causes of our energy problems can be found in pricing and fiscal policies that foster wasteful use of resources. They can be found in our industrial and technological policies, in our life-styles, and in a host of other factors well outside the traditional jurisdiction of environment agencies.

This means that responsibility for protecting the environment must be shared by those agencies whose policies impact most directly on it. For example, environment should be a main concern of ministries of finance and energy.

To sum up, Mr Vice-Chairman, the framework for environmental policy needs to be broadened in two directions if we are to tackle the issues in the future.

First, we must, as a matter of urgency, integrate environmental and development considerations into our key decisions on central economic policies. Environmental sustainability must become an integral part of development in all countries and in all economic sectors: agriculture, industry, energy. The "react-and-cure" attitude to environmental problems must give way to "anticipate-and-prevent" - in our international policies concerning trade, development assistance, transportation, and with regard to peace and security. We must attack the problems at their source rather than react to the symptoms.

Second, we are forced to recognize the accelerating ecological interdependence among nations. On many fronts, we are approaching natural thresholds which we cannot cross without threatening essential life-support systems. Today, we risk endangering the survival of life on earth. The causes and effects are inherently transnational. International co-operation is absolutely essential.

Speaking now from this rostrum in Moscow, I would like to take this opportunity to say that we are gratified to learn that several of our ideas on the World Commission are already shared by the Soviet Union. Secretary General Gorbachev, in his speech to the 27th Party Congress last February, spoke of the need for rational use of the world's resources as assets belonging to all humanity. He too noted that it is becoming increasingly apparent that we must develop effective international procedures to achieve this aim, and has called for co-operation on a worldwide scale for close and constructive joint action.

Secretary-General Gorbachev has described pollution of the environment and exhaustion of natural resources as global problems affecting the very foundations of the existence of civilization. He has

pointed to the growing interdependence between countries, and underlined the need for constructive and creative relations between states and peoples.

The Soviet Union is giving increasing attention to environmental issues such as long-range air pollution, marine pollution, low-waste technologies and soil erosion. Eastern Europe has an outstanding network of national parks and a deeply-entrenched concern for nature. Obviously, you have much to contribute to our deliberations.

Mr Vice-Chairman, my basic theme of global interdependence also applies to the questions of peace and security.

Everyone is aware of the threats to the Earth's environment from the risk of nuclear war, the arms build-up and its possible spread to outer space. The consequences are horrific. We have therefore been encouraged by the perspectives for radical reductions of present levels of nuclear weapons discussed in Reykjavik by the Secretary General of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the President of the United States of America.

But the pursuit of peace requires not just an effort to reduce and eliminate weapons. It also requires measures to reduce and eliminate potential sources of conflict.

We must learn to think of security not merely in military terms but in a broader environmental and economic context.

We all accept international responsibility for preventing war. I say we must broaden that global sense of responsibility to include the environment - because the environment underlies all issues of peace and security. History provides many examples of states which collapsed in an environmental crisis leading to famine, migration and rebellion. Today, the disruption of the ecological balance could well become a threat to regional and global security. The issues of development and environment are also issues of peace.

Therefore, in the future, governments striving for security will have to reorient their priorities towards the critical issues of environment and development.

Two world wars and countless regional conflicts have taught us that national security requires effective multilateral institutions. This acceptance of multilateralism has been extended to economic questions such as trade, finance and development.

But in recent years multilateralism has been on the decline despite the fact that now, more than ever, we need international co-operation to put an end to poverty and to avert the threats to our survival.

The acceptance of a joint responsibility for the environment, which belongs to all human beings, will give us a fresh start in the search for peace and coexistence. In this sense the work of the World Commission is a step towards this great but elusive goal.