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ПРОГРАММА ОРГАНИЗАЦИИ ОБЪЕДИНЕННЫХ НАЦИЙ ПО ОКРУЖАЮЩЕЙ СРЕДЕ

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STATEMENT

UNITED NATIONS ENVIRONMENT PROGRAMME

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MULTILATERAL ENVIRONMENTAL AGREEMENTS AS A POLICY RESPONSE TO INTERNATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL AND HEALTH PROBLEMS

Mr. Chairman, distinguished participants, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to have the opportunity to continue the tradition of UNEP addressing this annual Health and Environment conference. I would like to convey my congratulations to World Information Transfer on this, the 10th anniversary of the First International Conference on Health and Environment. Each year the conference has garnered wide acclaim for the quality of presentations and participants and for the fruitful deliberations on the important inter-linkages between human health and the health of our environment. I have no doubt that this year's conference will be no exception, as it addresses the important topic of the economics of health and the environment.

In our panel discussion today, as we consider *Globalization and Health*, I would like to concentrate my remarks on **multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs) as a policy response to environment and health problems**, and UNEP's role in this regard.

Mr. Chairman,

Despite far reaching improvements in human health globally over the past decades, with people living longer and healthier lives, environmental degradation, aptly referred to as "today's silent emergency" continues to contribute heavily to many of today's most pressing global health threats. It is estimated by the World Health Organization (WHO) that nearly a quarter of the global burden of disease and injury is related to environmental disruption and decline. High on this list are polluted air, dirty water, poor sanitation and insect-transmitted diseases such as malaria. Tragically, children are the victims in as many as two-thirds of all environmentally-related deaths.

The vulnerability of **children to environmental health** threats was highlighted just last month by the Group of Eight (G8) Environment Ministers, at their annual meeting held in Trieste, Italy. The G8 discussed *Environment and Health* as one of their three main topics and in their communiqué expressed, as they have in past years, a fervent commitment to protecting human health from environmental degradation of all forms and to base policy measures on the precautionary approach as outlined in the 1992 Rio Declaration on Environment and Development.

UNEP is also continuing to focus on protecting the health of children from environment-related threats. In partnership with UNICEF, and also with WHO, we are working to help elevate the interlinkages between children's health and the sustainable management of the environment on the international agenda, by forging links between two intergovernmental events, the Special Session of the General Assembly on Children, which will be held in September 2001 and subsequently the World Summit on Sustainable Development, which will be held in 2002. These events provide unique opportunities to stress the mutually reinforcing goals of meeting the needs of children and managing the environmental challenges of the 21st century, specifically by calling attention to how environmental factors affect child health.

Mr. Chairman,

Let me now turn to **MEAs** and their role as a key policy response required to protect not only the environment, but also human health. To date, it is estimated that there are more than 500 international treaties and agreements related to the environment. The existence of such legally binding agreements is a remarkable feat of the global community, clearly indicating a collective will and commitment to protecting the environment and, by extension, human health. UNEP has been facilitating the development of this body of environmental law for nearly 30 years, helping to craft innovative responses, and build and enhance processes to address the most pressing environmental challenges which threaten human health. This afternoon, I would like to highlight recent progress that has been made in key MEAs related to the protection of human health.

A major achievement over the last year was the completion in December 2000 of a series of intensive negotiations, held under the auspices of UNEP, to minimize and eliminate some of the most toxic chemicals ever created, **Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs)** such as PCBs, dioxins and DDT. Recognising that POPs endanger human health globally and the environment from one generation to the next, countries were compelled to negotiate a treaty able to withstand the test of time, so as to secure the health of future generations, and the integrity of the chain of life.

The treaty sets out control measures covering the production, import, export, disposal and use of POPs. Governments commit to promoting the best available technologies and practices before replacing existing POPs, while preventing the development of new substances. They will draw up national legislation and develop action plans for carrying out their commitments, relating to reporting, research, development, monitoring, public information and education. The control measures will apply to an initial list of the so-called “dirty dozen” chemicals and industrial by-products, but a Review Committee will consider additional candidates for the POPs list on a regular basis. This will ensure that the treaty remains dynamic and responsive to new scientific findings. Most of the 12 chemicals are subject to an immediate ban, with the exception of a health-related exemption of DDT, which is still needed in many countries to control malarial mosquitoes.

The treaty will be formally adopted and signed by ministers and other plenipotentiaries at a Diplomatic Conference in Stockholm next month, and will enter into force when 50 Governments have signed and ratified it.

Beyond POPs, the potential threats that other chemicals pose to human health and the environment also continue to be addressed. In this regard, UNEP’s Governing Council decided at its 21st session in February this year that a global study on the health and environmental impacts of **mercury** should be undertaken by UNEP. The study will, *inter alia*, undertake an assessment of the cost effectiveness of current mercury anti-pollution measures and technologies.

Another major milestone – and another key policy response to environment and health threats – was the opening for signature of the **Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety** to Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), at UNEP's headquarters in Nairobi in May 2000. To date, 89 countries have signed the Protocol, and it will enter into force once 50 countries have ratified it, a step already taken by 2 countries, Bulgaria and Trinidad and Tobago. The Protocol, which reflects growing public concern about the potential risks brought on by biotechnology to human health and the environment, seeks to protect the planet's species and ecosystems from the potential risks posed by living modified organisms (LMOs). The Protocol establishes an advanced informed agreement procedure for ensuring that countries are provided with the information necessary to make informed decisions before agreeing to the import of such organisms. The Protocol has been hailed as a breakthrough from a health and environment perspective in that it is the first global treaty that enshrines the "precautionary approach" as a principle of international environmental law.

Agreements to protect the environment and human health are also vital at the regional level. For example, last month in Kuala Lumpur, South-East Asian nations met to negotiate an agreement designed to prevent a repeat of the devastating **haze from forest fires** that plagued the region in 1997 and 1998. UNEP, in collaboration with the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) Secretariat, prepared an outline of elements that could be included by Government negotiators in an ASEAN transboundary haze pollution agreement. In the 1997-98 fires, which were estimated to have caused losses of about US\$9.3 billion, destroying approximately 10 million hectares of Indonesia's forests, more than 20 million people were exposed to extremely high levels of pollutants known to cause both acute and long-term health effects.

Another important environmental health related activity that UNEP undertook over the past year, culminated in the release last month of UNEP's final report on the environmental impact of depleted uranium (DU) ammunition used during the 1999 Kosovo conflict. In November of 2000, a UNEP field mission visited 11 of the 112 sites that were identified by NATO as being targeted by ordnance containing DU. The UNEP team, consisting of 14 scientists from several countries, collected soil, water and vegetation samples and conducted smear tests. Although the mission findings show no cause for alarm, the report describes specific situations where risks could be significant to human health and the environment. Some precautionary action recommended by UNEP especially regarding impacts to groundwater, includes visiting all DU sites in Kosovo, removing slightly radioactive penetrators, decontaminating areas where feasible and providing information to local populations on precautions to be taken if DU is found.

Mr. Chairman,

MEAs are a key component in the international communities' arsenal of policy responses to environment and health threats. They help to weave a web of safeguards to protect the physical environment, and by extension, human health. However, real and sustained progress can only be made if we strive together, the UN system, the non-governmental community and the private sector, to foster intersectoral cooperation at the local, national,

regional and international levels to promote environmental health. In this regard, I wish to conclude with a thought and a challenge that was expressed by Environment Ministers in the Malmö Declaration, adopted at the first Global Ministerial Environment Forum last year, namely that “at the dawn of this new century, we have at our disposal the human and material resources to achieve sustainable development, not as an abstract concept but as a concrete reality”. Ladies and gentleman, let us harness those resources to lift the unacceptably high - and preventable – environmental health burden, and move towards a development that is truly sustainable.

Thank you.