



United Nations Environment Programme

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PROGRAMME DES NATIONS UNIES POUR L'ENVIRONNEMENT • PROGRAMA DE LAS NACIONES UNIDAS PARA EL MEDIO AMBIENTE
ПРОГРАММА ОРГАНИЗАЦИИ ОБЪЕДИНЕННЫХ НАЦИЙ ПО ОКРУЖАЮЩЕЙ СРЕДЕ

THIRTEENTH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON

HEALTH AND ENVIRONMENT: GLOBAL PARTNERS FOR GLOBAL SOLUTIONS

STATEMENT

**UNITED NATIONS
ENVIRONMENT PROGRAMME**

Chair, distinguished participants, ladies and gentlemen,

The links that are the subject of this 13th annual WIT conference - those between environmental degradation, population pressures and conflict - are widely acknowledged yet poorly understood. A survey of Governments that UNEP undertook last year to assess how best to enhance the scientific base of UNEP, indicated that the two main gaps in environmental understanding around the world are the relationship between the environment and conflict, and between the environment and poverty. Improving our comprehension of these linkages could serve as an important early warning system, alerting policy makers to environmental factors which could spur tensions. Distinguished chair, I would like to devote my remarks to providing information about UNEP's perspective on these linkages and activities that UNEP has been undertaking in this field.

While it is commonly assumed that environmental factors can spike tensions and trigger disputes, it is important to stress that environmental degradation and resource scarcity do not directly lead to conflict. They are one strand within a complex web of causality in which a series of socio-economic problems, such as population pressure, poverty, forced migration, refugee movements, political instability and ethno-political tensions are intertwined. For example, environmental pressures and socio-economic marginalization and can lead to confrontations if they are combined with high population density and a lack of social safety nets and institutional mechanisms to mitigate or prevent conflicts.

Such interplay of factors was studied in an initiative that UNEP has been undertaking in collaboration with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and UNDP, and a constellation of other UN agencies and NGOs, on 'Environment and Security in Europe'. The initiative promotes the use of environmental management as a strategy for enhancing cooperation and reducing insecurity, with an initial focus on South Eastern Europe and Central Asia. It was a response to a growing understanding that increased resource scarcity and degradation of natural systems, and problems such as inequitable access to critical resources and transboundary movement of hazardous materials can pose substantial threats to security for the countries of these regions.

The initiative included research which revealed numerous environmental hot spots, where water and groundwater pollution, availability and distribution; legacies of conflict; industrial and agricultural pollution; toxic and radioactive waste; land degradation, salinization and desertification; and depletion of natural resources negatively impact on economic development and public health. These environmental issues become

national security concerns when they are combined with high population density or urbanization, socio-economic pressures, weak governance structures, and tensions between communities or transboundary disputes.

Take the example of the Ferghana Valley, which stretches over three Central Asian countries, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, with linguistically and ethnically distinct populations. The unclear borders crossing the Valley led to a disruption of the social and economic structures, further exacerbated by population influx and density. Scarce natural resources and their intensive use as a source for basic human survival and livelihoods, high levels of pollution (mainly water pollution), soil degradation and overpopulation have led to major threats to human development and security. Several communities have experienced ethnic clashes triggering violence since the late 1980s.

There are ample cases of such conflicts throughout the world. Consider, for example, the semi-arid land of northern Uganda, usually referred to as Karamoja. It is home to pastoralists called karimojong, made up of several tribes which depend on livestock for food, payment of bride price and other cash needs. Karamoja is characterized by low/unreliable rainfall. Scarcity of water for human and animal needs, and inadequate pasture for grazing, results in overstocking of livestock in the area in relation to the carrying capacity of the limited pasture. The groundwater resources on which the population depends has been reducing because the water table in the area has been falling since 1960, as a result of the effects of drought and other aspects of environmental degradation. Also, the rate of livestock loss is high, due to the effects of drought and disease. Furthermore, about 50 per cent of Karamoja is a protected biodiversity conservation area, where the government prohibits any human activities. This explosive combination of factors has led to internal armed conflicts and cattle raiding between the different tribes, and also to external armed conflicts with people from neighboring countries with the same resource scarcity problems.

On the other end of the spectrum from early warning of conflicts, UNEP has a unit devoted to post-conflict assessment, which extends the organization's work in areas of the world where the natural and human environment has been damaged as a direct or indirect consequence of conflict. Post-conflict environmental assessments are a vital tool for making independent and reliable investigations of environmental impacts and for providing clear recommendations on the necessary remediation. Environmental activities following a conflict must meet urgent environmental and health needs. Keeping environmental priorities on the agenda throughout the post-conflict reconstruction is equally important. A healthy environment is a prerequisite for sound and sustainable

development. People cannot secure real and sustainable economic development if they are confronted by contaminated water, polluted land and declining natural resources. Activities must support longer-term goals for managing natural resources, address environmental management practices and promote regional environmental cooperation.

Most recently, UNEP's Post Conflict Assessment Unit compiled a study of Liberia, which found that nearly 15 years of conflict have severely compromised the country's environment, with drinking water and sewage systems in such a damaged state they pose a serious threat to public health. Urgent action is needed to restore electricity supplies, including the country's main hydroelectric plant, as serious electricity shortages are forcing many Liberians to chop down trees and destroy precious habitats like mangrove swamps for fuel wood and charcoal. In addition, the reports says, collection of urban and municipal waste had all but ceased as a result of the conflict leading to waste mountains and forcing local people to burn their rubbish, creating air pollution and further threats to human health.

In 2003, UNEP issued a report on the environmental conditions in Iraq, offering a preliminary assessment of the main environmental threats facing the country and recommending actions for immediate relief and long-term recovery. The report stressed the need for urgent measures to address humanitarian issues. Recommended priorities included restoring the water supply and sanitation systems, cleaning-up possible pollution 'hot spots' and cleaning-up waste sites to reduce the risk of disease epidemics from accumulated municipal and medical wastes. Another recommended priority activity should be conducting a scientific assessment of sites struck with weapons containing depleted uranium (DU). The report recommends that guidelines be distributed immediately to military and civilian personnel, and to the general public, on how to minimize the risk of accidental exposure to DU. A major threat to the Iraqi people is the accumulation of physical damage to the country's environmental infrastructure. In particular, the destruction of, and lack of investment in, water and sanitation systems has led to higher levels of pollution and health risks.

In 2002, UNEP's assessment mission to Afghanistan found that the environment had been degraded to an alarming extent, with potentially serious implications for human health. The report highlighted the pressures that conflict, poverty and population growth have placed on freshwater, soils, forests, wildlife and other natural resources. Poor environmental management of wastes had further contributed to health

risks. Tests of drinking water in urban areas revealed high concentrations of bacterial contaminants creating a public health threat, particularly for children who are susceptible to deadly cholera. UNEP's investigations of oil refineries and transport terminals and brick, asphalt and lead battery factories revealed acute environmental and human health risks, due to poorly maintained, rudimentary technologies and a lack of management know-how.

Distinguished Chair, as Colin Powell, the US Secretary of State, observed before the World Summit on Sustainable Development, "Sustainable development is...a security imperative. Poverty, environmental degradation and despair are destroyers of people, of societies, of nations. This unholy trinity can destabilize countries, even entire regions". So as we consider at this annual WIT conference the linkages between environment, population and conflict, we must stress that environmental security, both for reducing the threats of war, and in successfully rehabilitating a country following conflict, must no longer be viewed as a luxury but needs to be seen as a fundamental part of a long lasting peace policy.

Thank you for the opportunity to address this conference.