
EIGHTH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON

HEALTH AND ENVIRONMENT:
GLOBAL PARTNERS FOR GLOBAL SOLUTIONS

**ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES TO HEALTH
THROUGH KEY STAGES OF LIFE**

STATEMENT

**UNITED NATIONS
ENVIRONMENT PROGRAMME**

MR. B. KANTE
SENIOR POLICY ADVISOR
TO THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Mr. Chairman, distinguished participants, ladies and gentlemen,

At the outset, I would like to convey the regrets of UNEP's Executive Director that he could not personally deliver this statement to you today. He sends his best wishes for a fruitful conference and his support for your efforts to address the critical interlinkages between human health and the health of our environment.

Despite vast improvements in human health globally over the past several decades, with people living longer and healthier lives, preventable illnesses and premature deaths are still occurring in appallingly large numbers in many regions of the world. Avoidable environmental factors are a primary contributing cause. We are all confronted with the startling facts and figures - deteriorating environmental conditions have a profound impact on health, especially during key stages of life, such as childhood.

Children are exposed, from the prenatal phase, to a barrage of environmental threats to their health and survival. The quality of the physical environment is an essential determinant of whether a child survives the first year of life and their further physical and mental development. In the poorest regions of the world today, one in five children will not live to see their fifth birthday, primarily due to environment-related, and thus preventable, diseases. This tragedy translates into an estimated 11 million childhood deaths a year (equal to the combined populations of Australia and New Zealand), primarily due to diarrhoea, respiratory infections and vector borne diseases such as malaria. Furthermore, environmental pollution and resource degradation are among the underlying causes of poverty and malnutrition, of which the impacts are most severely manifested on children, especially those living in ecologically vulnerable areas.

Faced with these facts, UNEP applauds and supports initiatives, such as this conference, to address environment issues that pose specific health threats through key stages of life. For its part, UNEP continues to stand ready to work with our partners within and outside the UN system to tackle environmental health issues. One example I would like to mention today is our collaboration within the framework of a Memorandum of Understanding with the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), to address children's environmental health issues, such as childhood lead poisoning.

Mr. Chairman,

This morning, as we consider the challenges to health and the environment that we are facing at the doorstep of the 21st Century, it is clear that we have to fight the battle on two interrelated fronts - the 'traditional' environmental health problems, stemming from poverty and a lack of essential resources, such as clean water, sanitation, adequate housing and nutrition; and the 'modern' environmental health hazards resulting largely from rapid development without adequate safeguards and unsustainable consumption. 'Modern' environmental health hazards include, air pollution (a recent study in the Bangladeshi capital of Dhaka estimated that air pollution is causing 15,000 premature deaths and several million cases of illness each year), inadequate waste management, hazardous wastes and the unsafe use of chemicals.

We must also keep an eye on longer term developments in the global environment. UNEP's Global Environment Outlook (GEO) -2000 report, which will be published shortly, states that new dimensions have been added to the major environmental issues facing the planet. In

addition to the growing incidence of forest fires and El Niño induced disasters, the report mentions the growing evidence of nitrogen deposition as a major cause of damage to ecosystems such as rivers, lakes, coastal areas and forests. It points to the growing threat from pesticides, heavy chemicals and other substances to the human health and the environment. Here we must recall the urgent need to revisit chapter 19 of Agenda 21 and implement its recommendations. In this regard, UNEP has been taking various initiatives in collaboration with its partners to implement the international chemicals agenda.

Thousands of people are killed or seriously poisoned by toxic pesticides and chemicals every year. During the past three decades, we have witnessed the dramatic growth in chemicals production and trade, a trend which will continue unabated into the 21st century. This proliferation has raised both public and official concern about the potential risks posed to human health by hazardous chemicals and pesticides, and spurred the international community to take preventive action.

Most recently, international consensus was reached on the need for a legally binding treaty to promote chemicals safety by preventing unwanted trade in hazardous chemicals and pesticides. The so-called Prior Informed Consent (PIC) treaty was negotiated under the auspices of UNEP and the Food and Agricultural Organisation of the UN (FAO). This agreement represents a major addition to our tool kit for reducing the negative impacts of human activities on human health and the natural environment. The PIC Treaty establishes a first line of defense against future tragedies by preventing unwanted imports of dangerous chemicals, particularly in developing countries, and points the way to further actions to ensure that humanity reaps only benefits from the use of chemicals.

However, the PIC Convention is just one brick in the overall edifice of the larger global chemicals agenda. As such, UNEP has also moved to the next step on the international chemicals agenda, namely to reduce and eliminate a number of so-called persistent organic pollutants, or POPs. Evidence about the likely effects of POPs is growing, and effects include cancer, allergies, and diseases of the central and peripheral nervous systems and the immune system. POPs remain in the environment and can, through repeated (and often seasonal) process of release and deposit, be transported to regions far from their original source. They are also transported via living organisms. They are highly soluble and bioaccumulative in fatty tissue, where concentrations can become magnified by up to 70,000 times background levels.

The threat to health and the environment from POPs is a global problem requiring global action, as such UNEP is facilitating the negotiation of a global treaty that will produce a legally binding agreement by the year 2000 that will help safeguard people worldwide from these dangerous pollutants and protect generations to come. In January 1999, negotiators made solid progress in drafting a global treaty to reduce and eliminate environmental emissions and discharges of POPs. The talks were the second in a series of five anticipated negotiating sessions to reach a global agreement on POPs. Successful completion of a convention by the year 2000 deadline in the UNEP mandate will contribute substantially to resolving the toxic legacy of the 20th century.

In addition to chemicals, human health and the environment are exposed to other potentially hazardous substances. UNEP's 1989 Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and Their Disposal seeks to ensure that wastes containing arsenic, lead, mercury, asbestos, and dozens of other chemicals and substances are not exported to countries that lack the capacity to manage or dispose of them properly.

The international community has also accepted the need for minimizing the risks from transboundary movements of living modified organisms developed through modern biotechnology. Recognizing that biotechnology can bring both considerable benefits to human society and potential risks to the environment and human health, governments are working to address this issue through long, and often difficult, negotiations to secure a Biosafety Protocol to the Convention on Biological Diversity.

These international environmental agreements offer the greatest benefits to those developing countries that lack the infrastructure and resources for safely managing potentially hazardous chemicals, wastes, and living modified organisms. To ensure that these treaties are effective, developed countries must follow through with technology transfer, information sharing, and other support to help all countries participate actively in protecting their citizens and the global environments from unacceptable risks.

Mr. Chairman,

UNEP is also concentrating on water as one of the five key areas of its work programme. As UNEP, and its partner in organising World Water Day this year - the United Nations University (UNU) cited, clean, safe water can be brought to the 1.4 billion people around the world who need it for as little as \$ 50 per person. This could prevent many of the 3.35 billion cases of illness and 5.3 million deaths caused each year by unsafe water. At any given time, an estimated one half of people in developing countries are suffering from diseases caused either directly by infection through the consumption of contaminated water or food, or indirectly by disease-carrying organisms (vectors), such as mosquitoes, that breed in water. These diseases include diarrhea, schistosomiasis, dengue fever, infection by intestinal worms, malaria, river blindness (onchocerciasis) and trachoma (which alone causes almost six million cases of blindness or severe complications annually). Consider the following: every eight seconds, a child dies from a water-related disease, and an estimated 80% of diseases in the developing world are caused by contaminated water.

Not only is the toll a human tragedy, but it means these people are less able to carry on productive lives, and this undermines social and economic development. Socio-economic factors are critical to understanding and addressing water-related environmental health issues. Thus, as one of the pillars of UNEP's water-related work, it has established the Global International Water Assessment (GIWA) programme, which will go beyond traditional assessment to integrate socio-economic factors and to provide critically needed information to decision-makers at national and sub-regional levels. Reliable, accessible and relevant monitoring and assessment information is needed to formulate policies that will reverse global environmental decline. The failure to forecast and prepare for the environmental problems of the twenty-first century may cause economic damage and loss of lives. As such UNEP is focusing on monitoring, assessment and early warning as the basis of its approach to environmental policy development.

Mr. Chairman,

The unprecedented pace of development underway throughout much of the world offers a wealth of opportunities for cost-effective environmental interventions. To date, in too many places, rapid industrial and commercial growth has resulted in environmental degradation and increased

threats to human health. Yet, this growth also contains the seeds of solutions. Many opportunities exist to reduce environmental risks, save resources, and protect public health. To ignore such options will impose on yet another generation an unacceptably high - and preventable - health burden and will deny the promise of sustainable global development.

I would like to conclude by reiterating UNEP's best wishes and support for a constructive and successful meeting.

Thank you.