



# United Nations Environment Programme

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ПРОГРАММА ОРГАНИЗАЦИИ ОБЪЕДИНЕННЫХ НАЦИЙ ПО ОКРУЖАЮЩЕЙ СРЕДЕ

## NINTH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON

# HEALTH AND ENVIRONMENT: SOLUTIONS FOR THE MILLENNIUM: GOVERNMENTAL

STATEMENT

**UNITED NATIONS  
ENVIRONMENT PROGRAMME**

Mr. Chairman, distinguished participants, ladies and gentlemen,

The search for effective *Solutions for the Millennium* espouses a desperate sense of urgency when we consider the appallingly number of, people afflicted with preventable illnesses, and of premature deaths, for which environmental factors are often principal contributing causes. We are all confronted with startling figures - infectious diseases cause approximately 37% of all deaths worldwide, with an estimated 40% of deaths attributable to various environmental factors, especially organic and chemical pollutants. 1.3 billion humans live in absolute poverty, and 2.5 million infants and children die each year from diarrhoea.

In our panel discussion this morning, as we consider the *Governmental* aspects of the *Solutions for the Millennium*, I would like to devote my remarks to the intergovernmental actions that the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) plays a role in catalysing, facilitating, crafting and implementing in order to address the critical inter-linkages between human health and the health of our environment.

Clearly, the definition, negotiation and creation of various legally binding conventions and protocols in the field of the environment represents an outstanding achievement of the international community, signalling a collective will and commitment to protecting the environment and, by extension, human health. Through the development of this expanding body of environmental law, we have been able to craft innovative responses, building and enhancing processes to address the most pressing environmental challenges which threaten human health. This body of international environmental law is creating a web of safeguards to protect the environment and human health. Today, I would like to provide you with an overview of recent progress that has been made in these various intergovernmental processes, and through the environmental health-related activities that are infused throughout UNEP's integrated programme of work.

In August 1999, recognising the need to forge stronger partnerships to combat the increasing threat of environmentally linked diseases, UNEP's Executive Director, Dr. Toepfer and Dr. Brundtland, the Director-General of WHO, signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in the field of Environmental Health, thereby pledging to pool the strengths of both organisations. The MoU serves to cement our already long-standing cooperation through a series of joint efforts in the field of monitoring and assessment of air, water and food contamination by physical, chemical and biological agents; environmentally sound management of chemicals; and the environmental and health impacts of global environmental change. Collaborative activities are envisaged in the areas of climate change, global surveillance of environmentally caused diseases, environmental health of the people in the Arctic region, environmental emergencies, and health and environmental effects of transport. We will also work to undertake health and environmental assessments of proposed policies and programmes, in order to evaluate the relationship between health, environment, development and economics, and integrate environmental health into national economic policies, legislation and management. Cooperation in a number of fields is also being strengthened, such as screening of

chemicals before they reach the market, programmes that improve water quality, and research on the effect of climate change on human health.

In this regard, UNEP and WHO, along with WMO, will be hosting an International Conference, in July, on *Climate and Health in Small Island Developing States* (SIDS), to be held in Fiji. SIDS are likely to be among the most vulnerable countries in the world to the effects of projected climate change, with many direct physical and ecological threats that pose significant risks to human health and welfare. The conference will aim to help inform stakeholders in SIDS, particularly in the Pacific region, about the potential health vulnerabilities, as well as measures that can be adopted to reduce the risks from present climate variability (for example, El Niño), as well as risks from sea level rise. It is also worth highlighting that UNEP is working with WHO, and various other partners, to support a project spearheaded by Harvard Medical School's Center for Health and the Global Environment, which aims to produce a comprehensive assessment of the various dimensions of biodiversity's importance for human health.

Mr. Chairman,

It is significant to note that at the beginning of this month the Group of Eight (G8) Environment Ministers, at their annual meeting held this year in Japan, which UNEP's Executive Director was able to attend, discussed *Environment and Health* as one of its four main issues. In their communiqué, they underscored that the protection of human health from the effects of pollution and other forms of environmental degradation is an issue on the forefront of citizens' concerns. They attached high priority to protecting children, pregnant women, the elderly and others who are disproportionately susceptible to the effects of environmental degradation, as they establish environmental guidelines, criteria and standards. Significantly, they also pledged that their policies should be based on the *precautionary approach*, as set forth in Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, adopted at the Earth Summit in Rio in 1992. The precautionary principle explicitly recognises that where there are threats of serious or irreversible damage, lack of full scientific certainty shall not be used as a reason for postponing cost-effective measures to prevent environmental degradation.

This principle has been embedded in the recently adopted "Cartagena" Biosafety Protocol to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). This is particularly significant from a health and environment perspective, as it is the first global treaty that reaffirms, incorporates and operationalises the precautionary principle. The protocol outlines procedures to deal with issues arising from the transboundary movement, transit, handling and use of genetically modified organisms (GMOs), and commodities containing them, that may adversely affect the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity or pose risks to human health and the environment. The precautionary principle is reflected in a key provision of the protocol which states that countries do not have to have complete "scientific certainty" to block imports of a GMO they fear could be harmful to biological diversity and, by extension, human health.

As we are all aware, biotechnology has been one of the most fiercely debated issues over the past year. Public concern about possible health and ecological risks of foods made with biotechnology has intensified in Europe and has spread rapidly to other countries, including the US. Proponents contend that biotechnology could help feed the developing world, cut costs and reduce the need for pesticides. Detractors say the health risks of the fledgling technology are unclear and the environmental hazards potentially alarming. These public concerns were reflected in the long and often difficult and tense inter-governmental negotiations that led to the conclusion, in January, of the Cartagena Protocol. For while many of the countries with modern biotechnology industries have domestic legislation, no binding international agreements existed to cover Living Modified Organisms (LMOs). Another concern was that many developing countries lack the technical, financial, institutional and human resources to address biosafety, and that they need greater capacity for assessing and managing risks, establishing adequate information systems, and developing expert human resources in this field. The agreed text of the Biosafety Protocol will be opened for signature at UNEP headquarters in Nairobi from 15 to 26 May, on the occasion of the Fifth Session of the Conference of the Parties to the CBD. The Protocol will then enter into force for its members after 50 countries have ratified it.

Significant headway has also been made over the past year with regard to the inter-governmental negotiations, being carried out under the auspices of UNEP, to reach international agreement on a global treaty which aims to ban the so-called "dirty dozen" list of Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs). The twelve POPs, including DDT, PCBs, and dioxins, are considered among the most dangerous of all toxic chemicals, because they have been linked to an array of adverse health effects, including birth defects, cancers and damaged reproductive and immune systems. POPs have been found even in Arctic species, thousands of miles from the source of the pollution. POPs persist for long periods and accumulate in living species, becoming more concentrated in fatty tissue as they move up the food chain and with time. These toxic contaminants can then be passed on to the next generation through breast milk. Because these POPs endanger human health and the environment from one generation to the next, countries must be compelled to negotiate a treaty that can withstand the test of time, so as to secure the health of future generations, and the integrity of the chain of life.

The 4th round of inter-governmental negotiations held last month made important progress on a number of key issues, and reaffirmed the eventual elimination of those twelve POPs as the goal of the Convention. They also stressed, subject to periodic review, the need to include public health exemptions, *inter alia*, for use of DDT in controlling malaria mosquitoes, as countries adopt alternative chemical and non-chemical strategies and reduce reliance on DDT. Intensive discussions also laid the basis for deciding on technical and financial assistance at the last round of negotiations, to be held in December 2000 in South Africa. While a number of contentious issues are outstanding, it is considered that negotiators are now in a good position to reach agreement on the treaty by the end of 2000, the deadline mandated by UNEP's Governing Council.

UNEP is also undertaking a number of immediate actions against POPs in advance of the treaty, including various workshops at the regional level. For example, despite increasing evidence of the harmful health and environmental effects of POPs, some countries in the Asia-Pacific region continue to produce and use significant amounts of the toxic chemicals. As such, last month, UNEP, FAO and WHO sponsored a workshop for South-East Asian countries, which for the first time brought together officials from health, agriculture and environment agencies to discuss the problems caused by using pesticides such as DDT to control disease vectors and crop pests. In this manner, UNEP is able to act as a broker of ideas, bringing together three sectors to identify practical ways of improving crop yields and community health while reducing the use of pesticides, so as to achieve mutual benefits through cooperative strategies that are ecologically sustainable. UNEP is also undertaking direct steps towards establishing national means for managing persistent toxic substances, which pose a danger to human health and the environment around the world, including a project, funded by the Global Environment Facility (GEF), which is assessing national needs for managing persistent toxic substances in representative countries.

Progress has also been made with regard to the Rotterdam Convention on the Prior Informed Consent (PIC) Procedure for Certain Hazardous Chemicals and Pesticides in International Trade, which was adopted in September 1998 and signed by 73 States. The Convention, for which UNEP and FAO provide the Interim Secretariat, will enter into force when 50 States have ratified it, which is expected in 2002. It is important to recognize that the States that developed and reached agreement on the Rotterdam Convention did so in record time because of their clear concern for health and the environment. For the same reason, they acknowledge that it is vital to start its operation immediately, implementing the PIC procedure in the Convention on a voluntary basis until it comes into effect. Chemicals and pesticides subject to the PIC procedure cannot be exported unless the importing country is made aware of their dangers and gives explicit consent, thereby protecting human health and the environment. Earlier this year, the Interim Chemical Review Committee, which is crucial for the successful operation of the Rotterdam Convention, met to formulate recommendations to guide future action to implement the Convention, thereby offering greater safeguards for the well being of people living today and generations to come. Its purpose is to make recommendations on the inclusion of banned and severely restricted chemicals or hazardous pesticide formulations in the PIC procedure.

UNEP has also been continuing its work to combat the effects of lead exposure on human health. There is a firm consensus among Governments, the lead and automotive industries, and health experts that gasoline should not contain lead. This consensus began to build in the 1970s, when the first health effects from exposure to airborne lead were suspected. Since that time, additional studies have confirmed that any absorption of lead into the body has detrimental effects, particularly on the early development of nervous systems in children and foetuses. With the knowledge of potential health effects, many Governments have established programmes to completely eliminate the use of lead as a gasoline additive. In 1999, unleaded gasoline accounted for 80% of total worldwide sales. In a significant portion of the remaining 20%, the lead content has been reduced,

generally at very low cost. The benefits, however, have been substantial, as lead can be removed from gasoline without harm and with net economic benefits. Still, millions of people in Asia, Latin America, and particularly Africa are still exposed to unacceptable levels of airborne lead. In response to this, UNEP and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) recently released a publication entitled, *Phasing Lead out of Gasoline*, which aims to help policy makers select the best options and programmes for reducing and eventually eliminating the use of lead in gasoline. It provides guidance on the various policy options available, including fuel distribution, vehicle manufacturer approaches, and the importance of correct tax or pricing policies, highlighting experiences from different countries.

UNEP has also undertaken a number of activities over the past year to help protect human health in environmental emergency situations. For example, in May 1999, UNEP's Executive Director set-up a joint UNEP/UNCHS (Habitat) Balkans Task Force (BTF), to assess the environmental and human settlement consequences of the Balkans conflict. In its assessment report, *The Kosovo Conflict -- Consequences for the Environment and Human Settlements*, released last October, the BTF concluded that pollution detected at four environmental "hot spots" in Serbia is serious and poses a threat to human health. As such, as part of the second phase of BTF, a group of international scientific experts recently worked on detailed environmental clean-up feasibility studies, and conducted an analysis of the specific activities and technical requirements at the four sites. An important development worth highlighting in this context is that urgent environmental problems have been recognized and tackled as part of the overall humanitarian assistance operation in the region. In this regard, in November 1999, as part of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) consolidated inter-agency appeal for 2000, a US\$17 million appeal for environmental priority emergency projects in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was launched.

Mr. Chairman,

Through the work that UNEP is undertaking, with our partners, under the guidance of the decisions that are taken by the Governments that serve on our Governing Council, and through the various inter-governmental processes that are serving to weave a web of safeguards to protect the physical environment, and by extension, human health, we are working towards an effective set of *Governmental Solutions for the Millennium*. However, 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. As we witness the unprecedented pace of development underway throughout much of the world, we must seize opportunities to reduce environmental risks, save resources, and protect public health, so as to lift the unacceptably high - and preventable - environmental health burden, and move towards a development that is truly sustainable.

Thank you.