

Peace and Environment: Opening of a Season for Non-Violence

Community of NGOs associated to DPI
United Nations Headquarters
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It is a pleasure to be with you this morning, particularly during the ongoing second Prepcom for the World Summit on Sustainable Development, in order to highlight the important relationship between national security, foreign policy and the changing role of environmental issues in the international order.

Striking a balance in this equation was a central theme in the Secretary-General's 'Millennium' report – "We the Peoples". Addressing the challenges that the international community will face in the 21st century, he identified 'freedom from fear', 'freedom from want' and 'sustaining our future' as key priorities for the Organization. The General Assembly endorsed his approach and adopted the Millennium Declaration, stressing that we must spare no effort to free all of humanity, and above all our children and grand children, from the threats of living on a planet irredeemably spoiled by human activities and whose resources will no longer be sufficient for their needs.

The fact that environmental protection is a vital component of the UN's efforts to achieve peace and security was also explicitly recognized when the United Nations received with the most prestigious award of all, two months ago in Stockholm, – the Nobel Peace Prize. It was also on that occasion, the 100th anniversary of the Nobel Prize, that 100 Nobel laureates, in a joint letter, warned that our security hangs on environmental and social reforms. They stressed that the most profound danger to world peace in the coming years will stem not from the irrational acts of states or individuals but from the legitimate demands of the world's poor and disenfranchised - noting that global warming, not of their making, will affect their fragile ecologies most.

In making this connection between peace and security, on the one hand, and economic and social development and environmental protection, on the other, they alluded to several trends that UNEP continues to highlight:

- That the mounting threats to natural resources – the land, the forest, and waters -- in developing countries are much more serious, important and complex than traditional pollution problems;
- That environmental degradation in developing countries, and particularly the least developed countries, is closely connected with poverty;
- That growing competition over dwindling and/or degraded resources, particularly vital resources such as water and energy, can spark conflict within and/or between nations;
- That resource degradation and ecological stresses are related directly to the long-term security and economic prosperity of nations.

If one looks at UNEP's second Global Environment Outlook Report (GEO 2) -- our most recent scientific assessment of the state of the global environment -- you can see confirmation that the environmental crisis facing humanity in the new millennium is perpetuated either because people have too much or too little. Thus, the work of the United Nations will have to focus on the need to meet social demands and address demographic pressures and poverty in developing countries, while confronting excessive and wasteful patterns of consumption in the developed world.

It is clear that the environmental crisis is beginning to reshape international relations and redefine national security priorities. In a real sense, concern for the global environment has become a force majeure in international relations. Regrettably, this new respect for the environment is born less of the power of argument than of harsh experience.

We have seen how watershed destruction has caused wells and springs to dry up; how mismanagement of drylands has allowed desertification to spread; how the 24 billion tonnes of fertile top soil lost each year leads to declining crop yields; and how 13 million hectares of forest are being dismembered every year leading to potential disastrous flooding. Through the destruction of tropical forest and other habitats our planet's biological diversity faces the single greatest mass extinction in 65 million years. Through poverty and greed, untold secrets for new medicines and natural products are being destroyed without ever having been discovered.

Addressing the global environmental crisis requires nothing less than a radical change in the conduct of the world policy and world economic relations. No nations, no matter how well armed, no matter how powerful, can alone protect itself against climate change, ozone layer destruction, loss of biodiversity and the fallout from natural or human made disasters and catastrophes. We must persist in the quest for united international action.

International agreements on the environment have helped to build confidence amongst nations. These positive results of environmental partnerships are perhaps too seldom considered. It is our hope that the World Summit on Sustainable Development will help redress the balance and make a case for an era of positive and genuinely cooperative actions. Cooperative action that is based on an acknowledgement that we may live in different countries, but we still live in one earth, whose security is threatened by our willful pursuit of unsustainable development.

In this context, and with the opening of the World Economic Forum nearby, we must note that while the positive aspects of globalization are numerous, there is also growing evidence that the gap between rich and poor is increasing and that the life support systems on which our economies depend are being overloaded.

The globalization process encompasses not only economic, financial and technological aspects but also human, cultural and spiritual dimensions. It brings with it the challenge of preserving our diversity, whether cultural or biological, for the two are intimately linked - respect for biological diversity implies respect for human diversity because both elements are fundamental to stability and durable peace on earth.

We have learned that those parts of the world with the most biodiversity also have the highest concentrations of indigenous cultures, and that the extinction of these cultures, including the unprecedented and alarming loss of linguistic diversity, could lead to further environmental degradation and loss of traditional knowledge.

In this context, UNEP created its Interfaith Partnership for the Environment, a long-standing dialogue with faith communities. This partnership grew from the realization that although a wide gap is perceived between religions, all faiths share a common ethic based on harmony with nature. It is through such a dialogue between the scientific, political and faith communities that we hope a greater understanding will emerge of the complexity of the challenges facing us, and a stronger commitment will prevail to take responsible actions for our common good.

Despite such efforts, peace is far from being guaranteed. Preventing the outbreak of violence and conflict remains the primary goal of the UN. However, it is also important to prevent conflict from recurring. In moving from emergency relief to long-term reconstruction and development, addressing environmental issues is increasingly recognized as a vital part of post-conflict efforts. UNEP is making an increasing contribution in this area. This can be seen from our work on environmental assessment of the impacts of refugees to post-conflict work in the Balkans and, most recently, with the establishment of the UNEP Post-Conflict Assessment Unit in Geneva, which will also be contributing to the UN system-wide response in Afghanistan. UNEP's post conflict environmental assessments provide rapid, independent analysis of environmental conditions in areas affected by conflicts and others emergencies. The goal is to provide focused, strategic analyses that help countries set environmental agendas and reintegrate themselves into the regional and the world community.

To conclude, ladies and gentlemen,

Our energies are now converging on the road to Johannesburg, where the Summit on Sustainable Development will be held from 26th August to 4th September. The Summit will be a call by the UN to further translate "we the peoples" from words into actions.

Although the geographic, economic and political boundaries are rapidly dissolving under the dominating effects of globalization, the need to foster a spirit of international cooperation has never been so great. Environment Ministers, at UNEP's first Global Ministerial Environment Forum in Malmoe, Sweden, unanimously expressed their confidence 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. This confidence from the world's leading environmental policy makers represents a solid foundation to achieve a global partnership linking north and south in a common endeavor for global security.

In the words of our Executive Director, Dr. Klaus Toepfer, we believe that involvement and cooperation on sustainable development will be the peace policy of the future. It is an endeavor to which I trust all in this room are committed. Thank you.