



International Conference on Population and Development

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UN SECRETARY-GENERAL SAYS PRINCIPLES OF RIGOUR, TOLERANCE, CONSCIENCE SHOULD SET TONE FOR POPULATION CONFERENCE

Boutros Boutros-Ghali Says Future of Human Society, Economic Order of Planet Depends on Conference

The following is the text of Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali's address to the International Conference on Population and Development's opening meeting this morning:

We meet today as the eyes of the world turn towards Cairo, the eternal city, acting as host to an event that is historic in the sense that for the first time at such a level, the States and peoples of the world are discussing issues of the utmost importance for present and future life on earth.

Allow me, at the outset, to present, on behalf of all who are present, on behalf of the United Nations organizations and on my own behalf, my sincere thanks and my profound gratitude to the Government and people of the Arab Republic of Egypt for hosting this important Conference. I should also like to thank the Government and people of Egypt for the gracious and generous hospitality afforded to the members of delegations attending this Conference. This hospitality is yet another indication of Egypt's constant support, over half a century, for the activities and goals, including peace-keeping, of the United Nations. I salute all who took part in the preparation of this Conference and I thank them.

Allow me, Mr. President, to extend my special greetings to President Muhammad Hosny Mubarak in appreciation of his wise and effective policies, based on a genuine understanding of the nature of the link between population and development. The international community, in appreciation of President Mubarak's commitment, decided to present His Excellency with the Population Award this year, recognizing Egypt's leading role in this essential aspect of development.

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This Conference is a turning point for the all-important population issue, and the results it achieves will thus have the most far-reaching impact on determining the course taken in addressing it.

If the Conference has the necessary political will, it will generate enormous impetus for a positive course that has the support and backing of the States and peoples of the world. In the absence of such political will, however, it can regrettably only give rise to greater division and estrangement and even to crisis situations.

I am not exaggerating when I say that not only does the future of human society depend on your Conference, but also the efficacy of the economic order of the planet on which we live.

Before this distinguished gathering today is a comprehensive and integrated programme of action that presents far-reaching proposals and recommendations in order to address the most serious issues at this juncture: poverty; development; environment; the status of women; the conditions in which today's children and the mainstay of the future are growing up; the issue of public health; and other issues linked with the present and future welfare of peoples.

If the Conference succeeds in adopting this programme, it will take a great step forward by generating the necessary impetus not only to determine the course to be taken in addressing the issues, but to ensure that that course will continue to be pursued and that its requirements will be met.

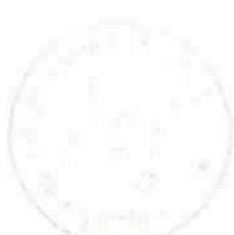
This is the real challenge that we must face, and we have before us today a golden opportunity that it is the duty of us all to exploit to the fullest.

In fact, the International Conference which opens today is the product of a long and wide-ranging analysis which the United Nations has been engaged in continuously since its establishment. In its preamble, the Charter strongly affirms the will of the international community to "promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom".

It was in this spirit that the Economic and Social Council established, in 1946, the Population Commission, which inspired the world Organization's first deliberations on this topic. At a very early stage, the General Assembly itself assumed responsibility for population questions, and was able to draw up in this field principles of action of which the successive development decades, *inter alia*, have borne the mark.

But the United Nations also instituted operational structures to assist States in their population policy. In this connection, everyone is aware of the role played by the United Nations Fund for Population Activities. The breadth of the programmes it has been conducting for 25 years in the different regions of the world and in various subject areas illustrates the significance of its activities.

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At this point, I must pay special tribute to all those -- the staff of the Fund, the departments of the Secretariat, the regional commissions, and the agencies and programmes of the United Nations -- who have worked so long and so hard to make this Conference a success.

The Executive Director of the Fund, Dr. Nafis Sadik, has played an outstanding role.

Everyone is indeed well aware that the international community's approach to population phenomena must be the subject of a broad debate that mobilizes all Member States at the highest level. This has been the role of the various international conferences held on this subject over the past 20 years or so, from the Bucharest Conference to the Mexico Conference.

The Conference opening today in Cairo marks a new and significant phase in the international community's consideration of population questions, and bears witness to the will to set this consideration in the context of development.

But I should also like to say that this Conference takes on its full meaning only if it is viewed against the background of all the international conferences the United Nations is currently conducting in the economic and social sphere.

I have more than once had occasion to emphasize the importance of the economic and social activities of the United Nations. Too often, public opinion and the media know the United Nations only through the role it plays in the service of peace and international security. These activities are certainly important, and deserve to be continuously encouraged. The fact remains, though, that they account for only about 30 per cent of the Organization's work. And for the most part, its other tasks are in the economic and social field.

I should also like to emphasize that the consideration of its collective future the international community is thus engaging in is, essentially, a consideration of the destiny of the human being. And this must remain present in our minds throughout the Conference.

It was indeed the human being in his environment that we discussed together in Rio.

It was the human being as the possessor of rights that we reflected on in Vienna.

It is the human being in his social development that will be at the centre of our debates in Copenhagen.

And it is the human being, through the status and condition of women, that will bring us together next year in Beijing.

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This concern is quite obviously to be found here today in Cairo, through the mandate assigned to us by the Conference on Population and Development. And the objectives set for us reflect the following vital questions:

What are the links between population, sustained economic growth and sustained economic growth and sustainable development?

What should our attitude be to population growth and structure?

How can equality of the sexes and emancipation of women be ensured?

What is the role to be played by the family?

How can child mortality and maternal mortality be reduced?

How can we protect the dignity and well-being of the old?

What is the best way of promoting population and family-planning policies?

How can internal and international migratory movements be controlled?

What should be the role of the non-governmental organizations in addressing these fundamental problems?

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Clearly, these are extremely delicate questions, for, let us be quite frank about it, even behind the most technical problems we shall be called upon to discuss, choices by society can implicitly be discerned. And consequently, the fears, hesitations and criticisms that have surrounded the preparations for this Conference are understandable.

But that is not, in my view, a reason -- far from it -- to evade questions that are vital to the future of mankind. And no one would understand it if the United Nations, one of whose main roles is to serve as the major forum for international society, failed to take up these fundamental questions.

To be faithful to its vocation and its nature, the United Nations must offer States a free and open framework for discussion, sensitive to the variety of opinions and convictions. Far be it from me, then, as this Conference opens, to offer you general models or ready-made answers.

I do believe, however, as Secretary-General of the United Nations, that it is my duty to invite you to approach this International Conference in a constructive and positive spirit.

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In this connection, I should like to suggest to you, not a method of work, but what I should like to call "principles of conduct". These principles, which should set the tone of the Cairo Conference, can, it seems to me, be embodied in three essential words which I offer for your attention: rigour, tolerance and conscience.

It is these three principles of conduct that I should like to reflect on for a few moments here before you.

The rigour we must respect is both the rigour of the facts and intellectual rigour.

The world today has 5,630,000,000 inhabitants. Each year, the world's population grows by almost 90 million. And United Nations projections are that, in the year 2050, it should be between 7,918,000,000 and 11,500,000,000.

We all know, too, that this population growth is largely concentrated in the world's poorest countries. Currently, four-and-a-half-billion people, or almost 80 per cent of the overall population, are living in the least developed regions of the world. And if nothing is done, this situation is likely to get worse in the years to come.

Hence, a major question confronts us: how can we adhere to the demand for social progress envisaged in the Charter when, every day, 377,000 new human beings are born, mostly in the developing regions and, in many cases, in circumstances of intolerable hardship and poverty?

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In the light of these inescapable realities, indifference and inaction are real crimes against the spirit. We must implement, encourage and support national, regional and international population policies, for -- to put it in the plainest terms -- it is through our intervention and determination that we can ensure harmonious progress for society and safeguard the future for subsequent generations to whom we are accountable from now on.

It would be inadmissible to rely on some kind of law of nature, in other words, to allow wars, disasters, famine or disease to regulate the world's demographic growth.

States must be supported in their efforts to control population increase. The purpose of a conference such as ours is not only to measure the progress achieved over a decade, but also to devise better ways of combining population and development, as the very title of our Conference urges us to do.

However, we must also consider population and family-planning policies from the broadest and most global perspective so as to address not only the immediate problem, but also its underlying causes. Indeed, population policies are inseparable from health, nutrition and education policies.

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In this connection, I should like to stress the role that such policies must assign to women. Educating and mobilizing women are goals essential to the success of all population and development policies throughout the world.

I am well aware that the formulation and implementation of such policies can, in some cases, conflict with attitudes or traditions. That is why I wish to emphasize the second principle that should guide us here -- the principle of tolerance.

Tolerance requires a conference such as ours to be highly respectful of cultures and beliefs, for, as we all know, a conference on population and development raises both social and ethical questions.

From a social standpoint, let us never forget that what we term "the population" is not an indiscriminate mass. Each member of the population belongs to a culture, a society, a tradition. A population consists of multiple relationships, in which each community deserves our respect, and of which the family is the nucleus.

Above all, a population encompasses diverse and varying loyalties; our discussions should take this into account.

However, a population is also a set of peoples and a set of individuals. Therefore, let us never fail to make the link between our Conference and the basic concept of the right of peoples. And let us never lose sight of the need for our policy to be consistent with human rights.

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Last year, at the Vienna Conference, I had the opportunity to stress the concept of universality and the dimension, both absolute and contingent, of human rights. It is this same dialectic of the universal and the particular, of identity and difference, that we should apply here -- especially when we address the most sensitive issues of the Conference.

I, therefore, call upon each and every one of you to be tolerant and respectful of the sensitivities that may be expressed during these discussions.

Such tolerance must be shown in the strongest possible way, for it should not lead to cautious compromises, half-measures, vague solutions or, still worse, statements that lull us into complacency. Likewise, we should avoid becoming trapped in absurd and outmoded disputes over words.

Such tolerance must also be mutual, for we cannot allow a given philosophical, moral or spiritual belief to be imposed upon the entire international community or to block the progress of humanity.

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In other words, the success of our Conference depends upon our efforts to overcome our apparent divisions, our temporary differences, our ideological and cultural barriers. That is why I designate conscience as the third principle of conduct of our Conference.

Conscience is traditionally defined as the capacity of the individual to know and judge himself as he really is. And this is indeed what is at stake for us.

For the knowledge which we must have of ourselves is, first and foremost, knowledge of our freedom of judgement and of the right of all women and men to lead and run their lives as they see fit, with respect for the freedom of others and the rules of society.

Men and women throughout the world must have not only the right, but also the means to choose their individual future and that of their families.

Such freedom of decision is a basic right which must be protected and encouraged. Otherwise, it is the world's poorest people -- and here I am thinking specifically of the status of women -- who would suffer the direst consequences.

However, such freedom can be genuine only if it is experienced and put into practice in a setting which encourages women and men to be responsible.

Therefore, only through the combination of freedom and responsibility, in a family of environment of concern for the dignity of the human person and the future of society, will the full development of individuals be possible.

However, the knowledge which we must have of ourselves includes awareness of our interdependence. All too often, we become aware of it only through crisis, force or threat, in the most negative way, as a result of waves of immigration or refugee flows.

Our debate here on population and development should give us a better grasp of the common fate not only of individuals, but of humanity -- and make it easier to convince public opinion in our countries of this.

Our Conference should also help us -- at any rate, this is my hope -- to fully shoulder our responsibilities towards future generations. What we call "the population" is really only a moment in the long history of humanity's journey. We should never lose sight of this; it sends us back to one of the most basic issues of our forthcoming debate, namely, how to implement population policies which respect the freedoms of all, while, at the same time, ensuring harmonious development and shared social progress for future generations.

Accordingly, the Cairo Conference represents one of those rare and basic moments when the community of nations, by inquiring into its current realities, points the way towards its common future.

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The Cairo Conference also represents a decisive stage in the assumption of our collective responsibility towards future generations.

Lastly, the Cairo Conference constitutes the strongest possible evidence of our determination to achieve joint control over the world's demographic, economic and social future.

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