"FACING A DISTANT THREAT"

STATEMENT BY

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TO THE OPENING SESSION OF THE CONFERENCE

OF PLENIPOTENTIARIES ON THE PROTECTION OF THE OZONE LAYER

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The Global Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer is the latest in a series of efforts undertaken or supported by the United Nations Environment Programme aimed at reaching broad agreement between countries on environmental problems and their solutions. Since the inception of UNEP, it has been clear to us that because so many environmental problems are intrinsically international, their solutions will be arrived at when agreement likewise crosses borders. And over the years we have learned that no aspect of our business is more valuable than international accord, nor has any aspect been so satisfying to witness as when countries set aside political and economic differences in order to agree upon environmental measures that have been shown to be mutually beneficial.

UNEP's Regional Seas Programme has seen some of the most positive examples of co-operation between countries experiencing serious difficulties on other fronts, some representatives of which have met at the environmental negotiating table while their governments were in an actual state of war.

But the global convention we address this week differs from all other international conventions in UNEP's history. There is nothing regional about this issue--the ozone layer protects every square metre of our planet and therefore every person from every continent and country. And the atmosphere that we hope to save from potentially irreversible imbalance makes up an entire component of our environment--it is as if we hoped, with one agreement, to prevent permanent damage to all oceans or all the soils in the world.

Such is the magnitude of the challenge we faced when UNEP's Government Council decided, more than ten years ago, to initiate work on establishing a plan of action to protect the Ozone Layer and later in 1982 on a framework convention that has culminated in this conference.

Thanks and congratulations are due to everyone involved in this delicate and crucial project: to the Working Group which met seven times in three years to formulate the framework convention and the protocol; to the Co-ordinating Committee on the Ozone Layer for its essential contribution of scientific facts and essential data; to the World Meteorological Organization for its scientific assessments and co-operation with UNEP; to all of the non-governmental organizations, scientists, and industries for their years of hard work in putting forth ideas and theories that contributed greatly to the progress of the Working Group.

And my most profound personal thanks go to the Austrian government for providing the necessary support to enable this Conference to meet in Vienna, home of so much culture and elegance.

Distinguished delegates:

I mentioned two of the differences that set a global ozone convention apart from others in the environmental field. But the most important difference of all is responsible for most of the difficulties we have had in deciding upon the most reasonable and equitable response to the threat of a modified ozone layer: It is that depletion of the ozone layer is not yet upon us. In previous conventions - such as the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, or the Regional Seas accords - we acted only <u>after</u> the threat to certain species was already evident (and in fact after some species had already disappeared forever), or after pollution threatened to make coastal waters unsuitable for fishing or bathing.

But this time we face a distant threat. This is the first global convention to address an issue that for the time being seems

far in the future and is of unknown proportions. This convention, as I see it, is the essence of the "anticipatory" response so many environmental issues call for: to deal with the threat of the problem before we have to deal with the problem itself. As we all surely realize in the case of the ozone layer, facing the problem itself might already be too late. That we are taking the anticipatory approach is a sign, I think, of a political maturity that has developed over the years, which recognizes how vital it is that we act to prevent environmental degradation or disaster with wisdom and foresight.

There is no doubt that a depleted ozone would harm people. But if we are lucky enough not to have laid the trap of a serious depletion already - which is by no means certain - then the people affected are not likely to be those of us in this room. We act now for the future. Those who could be threatened are the future generations that will have to live in a world that, through errors in judgement or mere short-sightedness, we risk making uninhabitable.

Our great frustration in ensuring that such errors are not made has been that our understanding of the problem has changed rapidly, even from one Working Group meeting to the next. Not everyone agrees on one single theory; and yet we are acting now, this week because we realize that to experiment with the make-up of our atmosphere is to experiment with the health of all humans and the welfare of all the organisms upon which we depend for survival.

Our understanding of the effects of increased UV-B radiation has also changed. A recent worry is the predicted non-linear relationship between high concentrations of chlorines in the atmosphere and consequent ozone depletion, with an attendant risk of more than 10% ozone reduction. The concern now is that a one per cent ozone decrease results in a two per cent increase in UV-B radiation, and as much as a fourfold increase in certain skin cancers and other biological effects. Further worry is the subject of continuing debate: even if ozone were to increase over the next several decades, what would be the possible cumulative "greenhouse" effects on climate, by ozone, carbon dioxide and other trace gases in the troposphere?

At the closing meeting of the fourth session of the Working Group, I added a note of caution on the subject of CFC 11 and 12 production. I said: "The 1983 figures represent a 21% reduction from the peak level of 1974, but behind those impressive figures lie two fairly disturbing trends. The first is that the over-all decrease since 1976 is made up of two separate factors - a 51% decrease in aerosols and a 36% increase in non-aerosol uses. The second is that a Chemical Manufacturers' Association report shows about a 7% increase in CFC-11 and CFC-12 in 1983 over 1982 levels, and both aerosol and non-aerosol uses were seen to have increased during that period."

This and other questions are still being investigated - all the more reason to act, and to act now. The plethora of scenarios to come out of the last decade of research does not provide any excuse for complacency. We have seen come and go the near-doomsday scenarios of the Seventies, followed by revisionist theories that left room for optimism, and very recently a return to what could easily be called a doomsday scenario, the aptly-named theory of "chlorine catastrophe".

I can only say for certain that unfounded optimism has no place in a matter as serious as this one. From a scientific and environmental standpoint we cannot afford to hope that a particular scenario is the definitive word on ozone depletion - we must prove it.

But while we wait for that proof, I cannot see the rationality of an argument which insists, in the face of scientific uncertainty and disagreement, that because no statistically significant depletion of total ozone has yet been recorded, we can go on producing chemicals that affect the atmosphere in unknown ways. If the long years of research have shown anything for certain, it is that we do not know enough about the interacting components of our atmosphere to take even the slightest risk of ruining its fragile balance.

Fortunately, the first steps in reducing production of CFCs were enough to bear because a good proportion of their uses were frivolous in comparison to the perceived risk to the ozone layer at the time. In my opinion, to err on the side of caution is so unprecedentedly important an issue, it is essential that governments not only ratify the instrument agreed at this meeting, but also that they adopt and implement action protocols that are commensurate with a prudent interpretation of the available facts. I am fully aware that this is no easy job. But I am sure that with such a serious matter, objective dialogue between all concerned must lead to satisfactory conclusions. Already at the World Industry Conference on Environmental Management, last November in Versailles, major industries of the world showed their clear vision of the environmental realities.

Preventing future calamity requires not only agreement but action. Governments and other responsible groups are usually accused of <u>reacting</u> to crises rather than foreseeing and preventing them. We have an opportunity here to show that experts, scientists, lawyers and governments <u>can</u> foresee potentially catastrophic dangers, and prevent them from happening.

Once accord is reached here in Vienna, as I am confident it will, parties to the convention must take specific measures to see that the spirit as well as the letter of the convention is acted upon. Only then will we have succeeded in allaying the world's understandable fears about the depletion of the ozone layer.

To aid in this process, UNEP is more than willing to continue providing the forum for the required dialogue and negotiations, and to contribute towards the costs of the interim secretariat during the initial two to three years of its operations, subject of course to the availability of resources in the Environment Fund. And UNEP is also ready, if so decided later by the Contracting Parties, to accept the designation prescribed in Article 7 Paragraph 3, as the organization to carry out the secretariat functions of the Convention.

In closing I can only repeat that if there is an environmental problem for which tardy response is absolutely unacceptable, it is the possible threat to the ozone layer. The stakes are too high. It is hard enough to cope with the permanent disappearance of a species, or the death of a lake, or the turning of fertile lands into desert; but in the case of ozone depletion, who could forgive us if we reacted too late?

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