OPENING STATEMENT

by

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at the First Session of the Ad Hoc Working Group of
Legal and Technical Experts for the
Preparation of the Protocol on Chlorofluorocarbons to
the Vienna Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer
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Distinguished experts, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a pleasure for me to welcome you on behalf of the Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) to this first session of the Vienna Group to prepare the Protocol for the control of Chlorofluorocarbons to the Vienna Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer. I hardly need tell you we face an important and formidable task; it will require determination, creativity and co-operation for its achievement.

Before I comment on the task ahead, I would like to report to you that the Vienna Convention, which was adopted on 22 March 1985 has now been signed by 27 countries and ratified by seven. This is good progress.

Framework of the Vienna Convention

We are here today because we recognize that urgent action is necessary to prevent destruction of the atmosphere's protective ozone shield. By continuing to release certain chemicals into the air our societies are conducting a global-scale experiment which could result in irreparable harm to human, plant and animal life and change the earth's climate. Moreover, we are conducting the experiment without fully understanding the consequences. The purpose of this meeting

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is to set in motion the governmental actions that will prevent harmful, large and irreversible changes to the stratospheric ozone layer and protect life on earth from these potential dangers..

The Vienna Convention provided the international community with a framework for working together to protect the stratospheric ozone layer. Opening the Vienna Conference in 1985, UNEP's Executive Director, Dr Mostafa Tolba called it "the first global convention to address an issue that for the time being seems far in the future and is of unknown proportions ... We act now for the future ... To experiment with the make-up of our atmosphere is to experiment with the health of all humans and the welfare of all organisms upon which we depend for survival."

With the Convention we accepted the obligation to take appropriate measures to protect human health and the environment against harmful effects of human activities which could modify the ozone layer. It gave us the mandate for international co-operation needed to address this major atmospheric concern.

Early efforts to protect the Ozone Layer

Even before the Convention was completed, it was recognized that the potential dangers to the ozone layer from man-made chemical releases would require emission controls. Adverse consequences can flow from the smallest depletion. A single per cent loss of ozone can induce a six per cent increase in certain types of disfiguring skin cancer. Yet projections of ozone depletion related to zero growth of CFC emissions approach five per cent and with only moderate growth double figure depletions are projected. A number of governments

had already initiated control measures. And, as you will recall all too well, the Convention drafting initiated a vigorous effort to prepare a protocol to control chlorofluorocarbons which they hoped to sign with the Convention. For several reasons - failure to agree on the science, disagreement over control strategies, inability to accommodate differing viewpoints - the attempt to achieve the protocol did not succeed that time.

A creative re-examination

We then - I believe wisely - stepped back from that experience and made a creative decision. Recognizing that our factual base needed strengthening, that issues were complex and our perceptions at variance, we decided to join together to explore these and other considerations in a series of collaborative international studies and workshops. Our expectatation was that through exchanging information and views we would have a better chance to see clearly solutions and reach agreement on the ozone issue. This was a novel and constructive approach, and one that commends itself for our use in addressing other complicated international environmental issues in the future.

The breadth and depth of our investigations over the past year is not only impressive in process and information provided but also a testimony to the energy and dedication with which everyone has approached the task. The international scientific assessment of stratospheric ozone sponsored by NASA, WMO and others within the CCOL provided more refined data on the atmosphere than ever before presented. It confirmed the risks of significant ozone depletion should chlorine-containing chemicals, particularly chlorofluorocarbons, be emitted to the atmosphere at a higher rate than at present. It

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also stressed the possibility of climate change occurring as a result of increasing levels of tropospheric ozone as well as of greenhouse gas properties of ozone-modifying substances.

The Rome Workshop in May 1986 on the economic aspects, sponsored by the Italian Government and the Commission of the European Communities, the June Conference on Health and Environmental Effects of Ozone modification and Climate Change, co-sponsored by UNEP and the US Environmental Protection Agency, and the Leesburg, Virginia, Workshop on control strategies have laid a solid groundwork for the development of a chlorofluorocarbon protocol. But the Rome Workshop heightened our awareness of another problem: while earlier steps taken by some governments to stop certain non-essential CFC uses had cut their emissions temporarily, other uses were on the incline so that global production was mounting (the Chemical Manufacturers Association estimated production increases of seven per cent for 1983 and 1984). The progress made at those meetings was significant, and it is with a sense of urgency that we begin today to translate that work from the experts to the diplomats' arena.

Greenhouse and the Ozone Holes

At the same time, events outside the workshop framework added greater urgency to the ozone question. In October 1985, UNEP/ICSU/WMO carried out a second assessment of the greenhouse gas/climate change issue at Villach, which concluded that the effects of trace gases are no longer confined to ozone depletion, but they are calculated to have at least a similar impact on the climate warming as CO_2.

In addition, although it could not be definitely attributable to the changing chemistry of the atmosphere, the renewed concern about the enormous hole in the ozone layer over the Antarctic and later

the first-time observation of stratospheric ozone depletion over northern Europe has given occasion for sober pause. Indeed, one of the heartening developments in recent months has been industry's public expression of concern about potential harmful CFC effects on the atmosphere and request that governments provide guidance to its members about the future of their products.

New momentum for protecting Ozone

These events during the past year-and-a-half have stepped up the pace for the May 1985 UNEP Governing Council request (to the Executive Director (in decision 13/17 I.5)) to convene a working group to continue work on a protocol addressing strategies for control of chlorofluorocarbons. The momentum is clearly building for the protocol. Shakespeare wrote in Julius Caesar that: "There is a tide in the affairs of men, which taken at the flood, leads on to victory." The evidence suggests, I believe, that such a tide is rising for the community of nations to take early steps to protect the ozone layer.

As your Chairman at Leesburg observed, we are coming to some broad areas of agreement: The ozone layer is essential to human habitability of the planet. It is being and will continue to be destroyed by chlorine-containing chemicals, particularly chlorofluorocarbons, which will allow greater levels of harmful radiation to reach the earth. The risks involved will affect all countries, and they are serious enough to warrant taking control measures. Because of the nature of the ozone problem and the controls required, the measures will necessitate global co-operation. To be accepted and effective the controls will have to be fair, economically manageable, easy to monitor and administer and adaptable to changing conditions.

Overcoming the Obstacles

The rising tide for ozone protection does not cover all of the rocks and shoals we will face along the way. Navigating the channel to a protocol may be obstructed by lack of scientific certainty, or failure to reach consensus on how much ozone depletion is tolerable. We could become stranded searching for the level of the combined emissions that cause depletion, or run aground on the conflicting national, commercial or individual interests which will be seeking protection.

We can overcome these obstacles if we acknowledge the real danger of ozone depletion and act together while we still have a chance to keep the damage small. Because we are reaching out for solution to a long-term problem, policy-makers will have to exercise judgement on a leap of faith, before all the science is available, protecting the common good and as best as possible the affected interests. That is the nature of decision-making in the face of uncertainty. And because the effects of ozone depletion remain latent for long periods of time, a degree of uncertainty will persist in this field. But with the risks involved, uncertainty is no rationale for inaction.

At the same time we will have to continue to understand better the impact of human activity on the atmosphere, by working to eliminate the uncertainties and tailoring our controls to fit the realities. UNEP will ensure through the CCOL that the scientific review and assessment process will be a continuing one, so that should science dictate, a prompt response can be determined and the protocol revised.

With good faith, willingness to co-operate and accommodate and some statesmanship, the ozone protocol can be achieved.

Last week I took part in the signing ceremony in New Caledonia at which 16 diverse metropolitan and small island states, split earlier by serious political differences, reached agreement on protecting the natural resources and environment of the South Pacific. Working in "The spirit of Leesburg", the same will be accomplished here.

The road and week ahead

Distinguished experts, the task to which we return this week, after over a year of re-examination, cries out with importance and difficulty. In its simplest terms it is to decide those measures humankind can take now to preserve the basic characteristics of the atmosphere that is the fundamental life-support system of the planet by acting to prevent large and irreversible changes to the stratospheric ozone layer. This is not an insignificant change!

Our goal is the adoption of a protocol. The goal can be accomplished in the months ahead because of the sense of concern we all share about the safety of the fragile ozone layer. We will, if necessary, reconvene for an additional session at the end of February. But let us concentrate on the task at hand and proceed with a common design to arrive at a protocol with the least delay possible.

In 1962, President John Kenndy of the United States paid a state visit to Canada. During the visit he and Prime Minister Diefenbaker undertook a small environmental task - a tree-planting ceremony - during which the President strained his back. Learning of the injury later, Diefenbaker sent a sympathetic letter to the President. Kennedy gave a two sentence reply: Dear Mr. Prime Minister: Thank you for your thoughtful letter. The tree will be there long after the discomfort is gone."

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Distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen,

As we address our important negotiation this week, there can be little doubt in any of our minds that the results of our work will be there long after the strains and pains of the negotiation are go: Let us now work together to develop the protocol which will protect the stratospheric ozone layer.

I declare the first session of the Ad Hoc Working Group of Lega and Technical Experts for the Preparation of the Protocol on Chlorofluorocarbons to be open.