



UNEP

Speech by

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and

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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Ten years after the land-mark Vienna Convention on the Protection of the Ozone Layer was signed, it is only fitting that the principal players who collectively convinced the world of the need to guard the ozone layer and then crafted the treaty should once again converge in this beautiful city to commemorate its tenth anniversary.

Indeed it was a curious amalgam of scientists, lawyers, politicians, members of the NGO community and the media who joined in this cooperative endeavour to shape the process that culminated in this treaty.

This commemorative function is an acknowledgement of their wisdom, their insights, their persistence, their legislative acumen, legal prowess, and scientific analysis.

It is, thus, with a profound sense of occasion that I welcome you all to this very special function.

It is said that "History is what takes place behind our backs". We can see this clearly enough about the past. When we reflect on history, the blindness of its human actors appears indeed lamentable. But there always seem to be excuses for us. As we stand outside their upheavals and turmoils, we feel that we must also be exempted from their short-sightedness. We feel that our modern techniques for processing information - information systems, computers, social survey groups - that are always ready to systematize, evaluate and digest the facts we feed into them will be sufficient to warn us of disasters and enable us to master the course of events.

But we forget that there are the old obstacles of human nature that must be overcome to make these powers of information effective. Vested interests or even intellectual lethargy may block the application of this knowledge.

Was it not the inertia of negligence that almost let our environment be destroyed even before we took notice?

At any rate, there seems to be no definite ratio between the quality of information fed into a computer and the wisdom of the decision that ensues.

History would not happen behind our backs, if only we utilized all the powers of information at our disposal with the wisdom to take correct decisions. We would be the masters of our destiny, the shapers of our future.

In Vienna ten years ago, history was made.

The consequences of the decisions that the global community took in forging the Vienna Convention have shaped the quality of our lives and shall continue to have a profound influence on the quality of life of our children and grand-children.

Though the steps that the Global community took at Vienna were small compared to the challenges facing it, they symbolized a major psychological breakthrough in dealing with the threat of the depletion of the ozone layer. In more ways than one, the Vienna Convention paved the way for the more comprehensive agreement that was to follow - the Montreal Protocol accord.

The Vienna Convention committed parties to protecting human health and the environment against the adverse effects of depletion of the ozone layer due to human activities. It set out broad principles of ozone layer protection, rather than establishing the detailed phase-out schedule of ozone depleting substances which was later included in the Montreal Protocol in 1987. It committed states to cooperate in researching the causes and effects of ozone depletion as well as alternative technologies; to cooperate on adopting legal and policy measures to counteract activities that are harmful to the atmosphere and to facilitate the transfer of technology and transmission of information, especially to developing countries.

It has been said that the Convention and the Montreal Protocol were the first ever global risk management treaties taking pre-emptive action to prevent an emerging problem reaching a crisis point. I also believe that the treaties united the environmental movement as never before. They gave the movement additional respectability and authority. The agreements exerted influence not only on politics but also on science, commerce, and education, and by doing so, changed our lives. Scientific concern translated into public disquiet. We voluntarily became the guardians of the ozone layer.

We became environment people. Universities established chairs. Children became teachers of their parents and the number of environmental action groups multiplied. The environmental movement matured and, not surprisingly, UNEP as the United Nations focal point for the environment and advocate for a healthy ozone layer, provided the institutional mechanism which allowed theory and academic discourse to be replaced by solutions and action.

In the Workshop held today under the auspices of the Government of Austria, we have had scientists, technologists, lawyers and policy makers expound on the origin and the history of ozone depletion as well as the efforts made by the global community to solve it.

But no one can adequately convey the sense of urgency with which national governments, the scientific community, the media, industry, and non-governmental groups got together to solve the problem of ozone depletion.

Sometimes history can be stranger than fiction. The sequence of events that led to the Vienna Convention and later to the Montreal Protocol moved with a dizzying speed. I will try to recapitulate some of them in a summary fashion.

A dedicated band of scientists postulate that some popular and profitable

chemicals may harm the stratospheric ozone layer, essential to the life on earth. The theory catches the popular imagination immediately in some countries. UNEP takes up the cause. Governments act initially but lose their enthusiasm later. The business community demands a smoking gun before taking action. But the scientists and UNEP persist. One of the scientists produces a dramatic proof of the existence of the ozone hole. The world community is shocked and takes some immediate action to reduce the consumption of the ozone depleting chemicals and declares that they will take further action if science demands it. Scientists produce further proof and give clear policy advice to Governments, twice in four years. Governments follow their advice and agree to phase-out the chemicals quickly. Developing countries keep out at first. But richer countries promise them their know-how and the incremental costs. Later almost all of them join in the effort. Scientists declare that the ozone layer will start healing in the next few years.

The sequence of events I have just recapitulated are true. And I think could not have been written even by the most imaginative of the script writers in Hollywood.

What are the lessons to be learnt from the Vienna Convention?

Perhaps, the global community could have responded faster. The eleven years which elapsed between the discovery of the link between CFCs and ozone depletion and the agreement on the Vienna Convention resulted in the emission of many more millions of tonnes of CFCs into the stratosphere which led to further depletion of the ozone layer. Clearly, we could have avoided this delay.

In the case of ozone depletion, governments took action before the damage to human health became apparent but not before the damage to the ozone layer actually occurred.

Will there be similar delay in the case of global warming? Will we similarly wait for more species to be extinct before we take steps to protect our biological diversity?

The Workshop today has analysed the factors behind this story exhaustively and I will not go into them. Suffice it to say that the true heroes and heroines of this story are a number of dedicated men and women who have toiled for the past many years to make this story come true.

For those who have toiled, it was mostly a labour of love. They participated in endless meetings and interminable discussions. Even when their Governments were internally divided on issues and even when they had less than a perfect mandate, many of these men and women made up their own mandate to protect the ozone layer which made a consensus possible. Many of them participated in Panels and Committees without any remuneration.

The entire world owes a great debt of gratitude to them - a debt which can