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ADDRESS BY SECRETARY-GENERAL TO CONFERENCE ON "INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION
AND THE HUMAN ENVIRONMENT, 21 May 1971

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I wish to welcome you once again to the United Nations and express to you my appreciation for your invitation to address the opening session of another important conference sponsored by The Institute on Man and Science, this year in co-operation with the Aspen Institute of Humanistic Studies.

This is the fifth convocation of the Institute devoted to the United Nations affairs. In 1966, your subject was "Peaceful Change" and in subsequent years, you focussed your attention on "Strengthening the United Nations", "The Second United Nations Development Decade" and "The Politics of Disarmament". These convocations have provided opportunities for provocative and useful examination of some of the critical problems faced by the international community. For this, we are all grateful.

May I extend my best wishes to my good friend and Institute President, Dr. Everett Clinchy, for many more years of constructive activity for the human community.

As we look around the world today, the picture has changed very little since you met here last. Men are fighting and killing each other while their brothers go cold and hungry; the frenzied race continues for bigger and more destructive weapons; the steadily increasing population of the planet foretells that there will be more mouths to feed and bodies to clothe, more roofs

to build, and more gainful employment to create than perhaps the talent and resources of this earth can provide.

And, above all, there is the mounting desecration of the planet itself - the fouling of air and water and the degradation of the land - which inflicts a deadly toll on all living creatures from the minute phytoplankton in the sea to man himself.

But the picture I describe is not entirely bleak, at least in one respect. Man is becoming increasingly aware of the urgent need to act to preserve the planet. He is becoming increasingly sensitive to the overriding reality that his one and only habitat is threatened, not by the forces of nature, but by his own negligence and greed.

The United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, which will be held in Stockholm next year, is a heartening indication of this concern. For the first time in history, the nations of the world will join together to act on a variety of problems that affect the existence of all living things. This is indeed an encouraging development, for it shows that the world community recognizes that environmental problems are the concern of all men, that they are international problems that must be dealt with through concerted action by all nations.

It is only fitting, therefore, that you should have chosen as the subject of your meeting "International Organization and the Human Environment".

I have read with interest the outline of the discussion that will engage your attention prepared by my good friend, Professor Richard Gardner. I am pleased to see that you will be dealing with some of the substantive agenda items of the Stockholm Conference. They are: Identification and Control of Pollutants and Nuisances of Broad International Significance, Environmental Aspects of National Resource Management and Management of Human Settlements for

Environmental Quality.

These subjects touch on a broad range of questions such as rural development, transport and communication, soils and agriculture, air and water quality, the effects of pollutants on the biosphere.

A most serious type of pollution, of course, is marine pollution. This was dramatized by the oil spill off the coast of California which killed thousands of birds and damaged beaches and by the Torrey Canyon accident which had disastrous consequences for the coasts of Britain and France.

But even more grave than these accidental occurrences is the fact that the oceans - which cover seventy percent of the earth's surface and which sustain all life on the planet - serve as the ultimate receptacle for man's sewage and waste.

The trickles that begin as melting snow in the Alps and the Rocky mountains broaden into majestic rivers that sweep to the seas laden with poisonous chemicals and human waste, there to collect in a lethal insult to the oceans, the cradle of life. The Mediterranean and the Baltic seas are already threatened with extinction.

And far from territorial waters, the destructive work of man can be seen. Thor Heyerdahl, whom I admire for his courage, vision and global outlook, has reported that a 200-mile square oil slick is drifting in the equatorial region of the Atlantic and could threaten the coastline of South America.

What kind of international action is needed to stop this pollution of the oceans? Are new international organizations needed to deal with this and other environmental problems that we all must face together? Or are existing international agencies sufficient to cope with these new challenges?

These are some of the questions to which you will address yourselves.

Whatever your conclusions, I think we can agree that there is a United Nations role in dealing with environmental problems - not only because many of these problems transcend national boundaries, but also because the United Nations and its agencies have long been concerned with them.

As early as 1949, for instance, the International Law Commission began to codify the law of the sea, including questions of pollution and conservation. It was assisted subsequently by a conference on the Living Resources of the Seas organized by the United Nations. Out of the work of this Commission came landmark draft conventions containing provisions on environmental protection, including one designed to prevent discharge from ships and pipelines.

There have been numerous conventions and agreements, initiated by the United Nations and its agencies, designed to protect various sectors of the environment. And now, the agencies have instituted programmes of their own.

UNESCO's "Man and Biosphere" programme, which becomes operational this year, is aimed at developing a scientific basis for the rational use and conservation of the biosphere's resources and for the improvement of the global relationship between man and the environment.

The International Maritime Consultative Organization has prepared a convention aimed at preventing pollution of the seas by oil. Subsequently, following the Torrey Canyon disaster, this was strengthened to permit coastal states to take protective measures against such accidents and to provide compensation for victims.

The FAO carries out numerous programmes in soil conservation, water development and management, conservation of marine wildlife and forest resources.

WHO assists in identifying, measuring and evaluating air and water pollution. It also provides direct services to Member States through research on the health aspects of environment.

The World Meteorological Organization, which has initiated the World Weather Watch, is establishing a global network to measure pollution in the atmosphere. Fifteen stations are already in operation in eleven countries.

Other agencies in the United Nations family - the UNDP, ICAO, the ILO, and the International Atomic Energy Agency - are all becoming increasingly involved with environmental problems. The UNDP is now taking into consideration environmental aspects in its numerous development projects.

It should be noted, therefore, that international organizations dealing with the environment already exist and are actively at work.

The questions that you will be dealing with, however, will go beyond what already exists. You will be asking very specific questions in regard to very specific functions, such as, should global pollution, resource management and human settlements be dealt with separately in different institutions or together in one set of institutions? Is there a need for a central mechanism to assess the "state of the environment" and to review the performance of governments and international agencies?

Some of these same questions will also be asked - and I trust answered - at Stockholm.

It is not for me to propose answers. That, of course, is the responsibility of the Member States which will be represented at the Conference. But your own analyses and deliberations could be of enormous assistance to the policy-makers who must make the decisions.

Two thousand years ago, Aristotle said:

"For that which is common to the greatest number has the least care bestowed upon it."

If he was thinking of air and water, he may well have been the first to recognize the inherent human problem in managing the environment. For what men use freely, they are apt to value least: the air we breathe, the water we drink, the skies we behold.

But Aristotle with all his wisdom could not have foreseen that the time would come when man, fearful of the ravages he has inflicted on that which is common, would attempt to bestow the necessary care. And not just care - but intelligence, resources, imagination and hard work. The fact that such a distinguished and influential group of individuals is assembled here today to discuss the ways to preserve "that which is common to the greatest number" is sufficient proof of this.

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, I wish you a successful meeting on the important subject you have chosen.