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SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 49th MEETING

Chairman:

Mr. BURKE

(Ireland)

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The meeting was called to order at 3 p.m.

AGENDA ITEM 77: DEVELOPMENT AND INTERNATIONAL ECONOMIC COOPERATION (PART V)
(continued)

(e) ENVIRONMENT (A/46/3, A/46/25, A/46/138-E/1991/52, A/46/156-E/1991/54, A/46/214-E/1991/77, A/46/308, 423 and 615, A/C.2/46/3 and 11, A/C.2/46/L.7 and L.9)

(f) DESERTIFICATION AND DROUGHT (A/46/3, A/46/25, A/46/157-E/1991/55, A/46/268-E/1991/107 and Corr.1, A/46/380-E/1991/142)

(g) HUMAN SETTLEMENTS (A/46/3, A/46/8 and Add.1 and Add.1/Corr.1, A/46/262-E/1991/96)

1. Mr. KJELLEN (Sweden), speaking on behalf of the Nordic countries, said that the Governing Council of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), at its sixteenth session, had adopted several important decisions concerning the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development. The Nordic countries, in their statement on agenda item 78, had already commented on some of those decisions, for example, on oceans and coastal areas, sea-level rise and freshwater resources, transfer of technology and integration of environment and development in UNEP.

2. The Nordic countries had welcomed the expert meetings, organized by UNEP in support of the Conference, on land-based sources of marine pollution, toxic chemicals and hazardous wastes. Those meetings should fill gaps in the Conference preparations and would increase the relevance of decisions taken in those areas by the Conference. They also welcomed the decision to establish a centre for urgent environmental assistance on an experimental basis.

3. The Nordic countries, as stated in their intervention on item 78, had urged UNEP to increase its contribution to the Conference preparatory process. They hoped that the UNEP Governing Council, at its special session in February 1992, would discuss the state-of-the-environment report, the Plan of Action to Combat Desertification, the consolidated report on follow-up activities and the report of the World Commission on Environment and Development. Such a discussion would provide valuable and timely input to UNCED.

4. With regard to human settlements, the Nordic countries had taken note of the positive outcome of the thirteenth session of the Commission on Human Settlements at Harare. One of the major items on its agenda had been human settlements and the Global Strategy for Shelter to the Year 2000 in the context of sustainable development and the contribution of the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat) to the Conference. They were satisfied with the resolution adopted on that issue, which adequately reflected the importance of human settlements and urbanization for environmentally sound and

(Mr. Kjellen, Sweden)

sustainable development, as well as the vital role which Habitat could and should play in that area, including its contribution to the Conference.

5. With respect to desertification, he also spoke as the Chairman of Working Group I of the Preparatory Committee for the Conference. The issue of desertification should continue to be one of the principal concerns of the international community within the field of environment and development. The documents before the Committee told of long and strenuous effort by the international community to combat desertification and the successes and failures, reflecting the extreme complexity of its climatic, social and economic factors. They also indicated that many intergovernmental schemes were under way, which were difficult to coordinate.

6. The UNEP Governing Council, at its sixteenth session, had stressed the need to refine the definition of the concept of desertification, taking into account recent findings about the influence of climate fluctuations. At the third session of the Preparatory Committee, reference had been made to that decision and the hope expressed that UNEP would cooperate fully with the Conference secretariat so that the fourth meeting of the Preparatory Committee would be fully prepared. The Nordic countries viewed as essential coordination of Agenda 21 and the report on the Plan of Action to Combat Desertification which the Governing Council would consider at its third special session. It was particularly important to seize the opportunity offered by the Conference to make decisive progress towards more efficient international action to fight desertification, in particular through reforestation.

7. Desertification was a problem in many parts of the world, but its consequences were especially serious in Africa, whose fragile ecosystems, drought and particularly difficult economic conditions combined to cause unsustainable land use and continued desertification in a vicious circle. The work carried out by the United Nations Sudano-Sahelian Office in that area was praiseworthy. Governments of the affected countries were mainly responsible for facing the situation, but it had already been recognized that the international community had a special responsibility for development in Africa. That joint effort must be sustained, and the issue of desertification took on symbolic value as the Rio Conference approached.

8. Recognizing that, the Preparatory Committee had decided that Working Group I would take up desertification as its first issue during the fourth session. On behalf of the Nordic countries, and in his capacity as Chairman of the Working Group, he said that no effort would be spared to contribute to a constructive discussion at the Preparatory Committee and the adoption of concrete decisions at the Conference.

9. Mr. BELL (Canada) said that, as a country whose economy relied heavily on natural resource exploitation, but at the same time had a largely urban population, Canada had learned that no development could be sustainable in the

(Mr. Bell, Canada)

long term unless resources were conserved for future generations and unless urban growth was managed.

10. Canada had been pleased by the results of the sixteenth session of the UNEP Governing Council. Among the issues discussed, one of particular concern to Canada was the protection of the marine environment. Canada had played a leading role in negotiating the decision to hold a meeting to formulate a draft strategy, including a programme of action to reduce land-based sources of marine pollution. The results of the meeting would be reported to the Preparatory Committee at its fourth session and were intended to form a substantive part of the oceans section of Agenda 21.

11. With regard to other decisions taken by the UNEP Governing Council, Canada supported the decision to establish a United Nations centre for urgent environmental assistance on an 18-month trial basis. In the view of his delegation, the lists of equipment and rosters of experts available to respond to man-made environmental emergencies would be crucial in ensuring that such disasters were dealt with quickly. Canada looked forward to reviewing the results at the next regular session of the Governing Council. On climate change, Canada supported the efforts to coordinate the work of the forums dealing with that issue with a view to ensuring continuing institutional cooperation to achieve positive results.

12. Human settlements were essential factors in the sustainable development equation, as they provided a focus for dealing with many of the symptoms of the global environment and development crisis, such as climate change, soil erosion and the pollution of oceans and fresh water; they played a pivotal role in the implementation of environmental policies and programmes. Canada had been a strong supporter of human settlement issues as early as the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment held at Stockholm and the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements held at Vancouver and believed that the link between human settlements must be strengthened.

13. His delegation welcomed the results achieved by the Commission on Human Settlements, in particular its constructive deliberations on the linkages between human settlements and sustainable development. During its third session, the Preparatory Committee for the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development had decided that human settlements would be treated as a separate area in the Agenda 21, and that the highest priority should be given to the urban environment within that programme. Canada had supported that decision strongly. Urbanization would be a dominant phenomenon in the twenty-first century and institutional capacities must be put in place to address effectively the accompanying social, economic and environmental pressures.

14. Over the past few months, two major international events focusing on the role of cities and sustainable development had taken place in Canada: the World Cities and the Environment Congress, held at Toronto, and the Third

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(Mr. Bell, Canada)

Summit Conference of Major Cities of the World, held at Montreal. Canada had also co-sponsored a five-city consultation project as part of the Urban Management Programme which was being implemented jointly by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the World Bank and Habitat.

15. To date, Habitat and the Secretary-General of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development had pursued consultations for the development of the human settlements programme, while taking into account the summary of views submitted by Member States. Equally important were the consultations with other United Nations agencies and with international organizations actively involved in that area, such as UNEP, the World Bank, UNDP, representatives of all levels of government and relevant independent sector organizations. Canada believed that that component of the preparatory process of the Conference should be strengthened, thereby allowing relevant organizations to share information.

16. In addition to the human settlements aspect of Agenda 21, other programme areas, such as fresh water, waste management, poverty and health would also reflect issues of concern to human settlements and the urban environment and it was equally important that those areas should be identified.

17. Canada recognized that the problems of desertification and drought represented a central issue which was of particular concern to the African countries of the Sahel. The report of the Secretary-General on desertification and drought in the region was excellent and the Plan of Action to Combat Desertification remained a valid strategy, although progress on implementation was slow. His delegation therefore urged UNEP to redouble its efforts to support the implementation of the Plan of Action.

18. His delegation fully supported the decision on desertification and drought adopted by the Preparatory Committee at its third session and hoped that detailed proposals on the issue would be developed for inclusion in Agenda 21; those proposals could be discussed at the fourth session of the Preparatory Committee.

19. His delegation commended the United Nations Sudano-Sahelian Office for its excellent work at the community, national and regional levels to combat desertification and urged the General Assembly to continue its support for that important agency.

20. Mr. WU Hailong (China) said that desertification and the related problem of drought remained serious issues for many countries, particularly the developing countries, and were causing great concern in the international community. The General Assembly had considered the item on numerous occasions, for example at the United Nations Conference on Desertification, held in 1977, at which the Plan of Action to Combat Desertification had been adopted. Since then the relevant organs of the United Nations and other related international and regional organizations had been doing beneficial

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(Mr. Wu Hailong, China)

work; for their part, developing countries affected by desertification were making unremitting efforts to combat desertification and, thanks to the assistance of the international community, they had achieved some positive results in halting the spread of desertification.

21. Nevertheless, according to statistics of the relevant United Nations organs, the problem in a number of the areas affected by desertification, far from being reduced, had increased. It was essential to undertake comprehensive research on desertification and to formulate more effective policy measures with a view to obtaining better results. In order to do that, more attention must be paid to two issues. The first was that desertification was not an isolated problem; it could not be separated from socio-economic, population and ecological problems and accordingly it could not be resolved as if it were only an ecological problem. In the case of many developing countries which were victims of desertification, the problem was closely related to their economic underdevelopment. Poverty and underdevelopment had compelled those countries to depend on excessive acquisitions from nature at the expense of serious damage to the environment. Accordingly, those countries had found themselves caught in a vicious cycle of poverty, excessive population growth and continuous deterioration of the environment. The fundamental solution therefore involved the creation of an international economic environment that was conducive to development so that those countries could ensure economic growth, eradicate poverty and ease the pressure on the environment. Second, increased international assistance should be provided to those countries in their struggle against desertification and drought. It was true that the international community and relevant organizations had done a great deal of useful work but, bearing in mind the seriousness of the problem and the magnitude of the financial resources required for its solution, it was clear that far more should be done. Many developing countries were struggling against desertification under unfavourable conditions and hard economic pressures, so that it was only natural that the international community should provide more assistance on preferential terms.

22. Mr. AL-UKLEH (United Arab Emirates) said that the resources available to mankind were limited and that life on Earth would be threatened if appropriate measures were not taken. All countries accordingly shared a responsibility: the industrialized countries must modify their consumption habits and the developing countries must solve their problems. Among ecological measures which should be adopted, it was important to limit the emission of gases affecting the ozone layer. The United Arab Emirates considered that the preservation of the environment was a task of fundamental importance for mankind and his delegation accordingly welcomed the largest conference ever held to solve the problem of pollution in the Gulf. That conference had urged that measures should be taken to avoid the dangers which threatened the ecology of the region and would guarantee to all a life of dignity without threatening the environment.

(Mr. Al-Ukleh, United Arab Emirates)

23. The Gulf Cooperation Council had stressed the destructive effects of oil spills in the sea, which were threatening marine life, not only in the Gulf, but in other regions as well. The oil-well fires in Kuwait demonstrated why the methodology had to be changed. Those criminal acts showed that environmental disasters did not affect individual countries, but entire regions. Studies should be conducted to determine the extent of the disaster in the region; however the countries of the region lacked the necessary resources to carry out such studies, making international assistance necessary, especially from United Nations agencies. It was also necessary to implement new environmental conservation programmes, as the United Arab Emirates had requested. There were many threats to the environment, and the relationship between environment and development was making itself felt throughout the world, pointing up the uselessness of national frontiers in such matters. While the developing countries should concentrate on attaining economic development, that should not serve as a pretext for neglecting environmental protection. He hoped that the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, to be held in June 1992, would lead to practical action on all those problems, which affected the North as well as the South.

24. Mr. RAICHEV (Bulgaria) said that the discussions on agenda items 78 and 79 had demonstrated that environmental problems were among the most pressing issues the international community had to resolve if it was to achieve sustainable development. Bulgaria attached great importance to enhancing the efficiency of UNEP and its Governing Council. With regard to the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, the results achieved thus far by the Preparatory Committee were satisfactory, and it was to be hoped that optimum use would be made of the time remaining to reach general agreement on all questions before the Committee. Many problems had arisen in that area, and their solution was of decisive importance for ensuring the ecological balance of the planet. His delegation was convinced that the Conference must achieve specific results on all the issues mentioned in General Assembly resolution 44/228. It fully supported the proposals concerning the preparation and signing at the Conference of a convention on climate change and a convention on biological diversity and for achieving consensus on the basic principles and instruments for the preservation and development of forests and forest ecosystems. Bulgaria was also particularly interested in the preservation of the ozone layer, the elimination of hazardous waste, the protection of the seas and oceans, the development of coastal zones, transboundary watercourses and other issues.

25. The Conference should promote the integration of environmental considerations into the economic development of all countries, in accordance with the principles of sustainable development. Efficient mechanisms should also be developed for the implementation of existing conventions. The Conference should allocate a prominent role to the promotion of regional cooperation in solving global environmental problems.

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(Mr. Raichev, Bulgaria)

26. Bulgaria welcomed the prospects for promoting regional cooperation in Europe and fully supported the protection of the Danube and the Black Sea, as well as the promotion of environmental cooperation with its neighbours. It attached special importance in that regard to the conclusions of the "Environment for Europe" Conference held in Czechoslovakia in June 1991. Bulgaria remained firmly committed to the implementation of the principles and objectives set forth in the document of that Conference and in the Bergen Ministerial Declaration on Sustainable Development in the ECE Region.

27. The environmental situation in Bulgaria was very serious and, in many regions, even critical. An environmental protection act had recently been passed which would form the basis of Bulgaria's environmental policy. The country did not, however, have a national environmental protection programme and lacked the information systems and modern set of standards necessary to stimulate the development of non-polluting industries. The process of democratization in Bulgaria would make it possible to discuss those issues freely, thereby enabling society to press for their solution. At the same time, the current economic situation prevented any solution of environmental problems, making them a source of tension and social conflicts instead. It would be very difficult to solve those problems without the help of the international community. Furthermore, Bulgaria urgently required assistance in developing its own environmental policy in the transition to a market economy. That was particularly true in the case of efforts to guarantee the safety of nuclear installations, an issue which had yet to be satisfactorily resolved.

28. The formulation of an effective national environmental policy was a prerequisite for steady and inflation-resistant economic growth. Bulgaria was convinced that those goals could be achieved with the introduction of market mechanisms.

29. His delegation believed that the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development should devote more attention to the grave environmental problems facing the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, which in many respects were worse than those of other regions. The current reforms under way there and the integration of those countries in the world economy would help strengthen the world economic system and invigorate world trade.

30. Bulgaria was actively participating in United Nations activities in the area of human settlements. Noting the Habitat report and plan of action for the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, he reminded the Committee that those countries needed assistance, particularly while they were developing new systems of housing finance and credit. He had the impression, however, that the Habitat report had not covered all countries in the region equally. Consequently, he proposed that the human settlements and housing situation should once again be studied closely and that uniform criteria should be applied to each country in order to identify the areas on which international cooperation through the Commission on Human Settlements and Habitat would be required.

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31. Mr. KERDPHOL (Thailand) said that the nations of the world had only one common heritage: the environment. Natural resources were limited, and most of them were not renewable. The problems currently facing the world could become the crises of the future if they were not resolved.

32. Two decades had passed since the King of Thailand had initiated crop-substitution projects to turn the hill tribes away from their traditional shifting-cultivation practices and the Queen had set up an impressive wildlife conservation project. There were currently more than 1,000 projects initiated by the King and Queen under way in the country.

33. As a developing country, Thailand was doing its part to preserve the natural environment. Some 16 years previously, it had set up a national environmental board and the Government had adopted legislation on wildlife preservation which provided for the creation of sanctuaries and regulated the administration of public parks. The rapid decrease in certain marine resources, particularly coral and the sea turtle, had prompted the adoption of a decree prohibiting the use of those resources for commercial gain. The Ministry of Education was currently working on a national environmental education strategy, aimed at all levels of education, and the Ministry of the Interior had delegated to the provinces responsibility for the management of their own resources. All logging concessions had been banned and severe penalties set for those found exploiting wildlife.

34. Thailand had set itself three primary goals in its most recent economic and social development plan: first, to improve its organizations and laws to ensure an administration conducive to environmental development; second, to mobilize investments in order to lessen pollution; and third, to establish a natural resources system that would be used in the planning process and permit the proper demarcation of forest and coastal areas for conservation purposes.

35. With regard to the issue of large-scale pelagic drift-net fishing, Thailand supported General Assembly resolution 44/225 and noted that it had never permitted its own fishing fleets to use such nets. The Thai fishing industry was, however, seriously threatened by the restrictions imposed on such fishing. The country had regulations prohibiting the canning of products obtained by fishing with large-scale pelagic drift-nets, and many factories refused to buy tuna caught with any type of drift-net. That restriction had led to a sharp drop in the fishing fleet's profits, forcing many vessels to cease operations altogether. That showed the indirect repercussions that an international prohibition could have on a country's economy, and his delegation therefore wished to have a detailed study carried out on the direct and indirect effects of the ban on large-scale pelagic drift-net fishing.

36. As Princess Chulabhorn had said to the UNEP Governing Council, the environment could only be preserved if those concerned with the problem had a profound conviction of principles.

The meeting rose at 4 p.m.