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CONSIDERATION OF THE PROVISIONAL AGENDA
FOR THE FORTY-FIFTH SESSION

Addendum

The question of convening an international conference
on the problems of human environment

Letter dated 20 May 1968 from the Permanent
Representative of Sweden addressed to the
Secretary-General of the United Nations

Acting upon instructions of my Government I have the honour to request, in accordance with rule 10 of the rules of procedure of the Economic and Social Council, that an item be inscribed on the agenda of the forty-fifth session of the Economic and Social Council entitled as follows:

"The question of convening an international conference on the problems of human environment".

An explanatory memorandum is enclosed.

Accept, Sir, etc.

(Signed) Sverker ASTROM
Ambassador, Permanent Representative
of Sweden to the United Nations

Explanatory memorandum

1. The purpose of the item proposed is to provide a framework for a comprehensive consideration within the United Nations of the problems of human environment.
2. The notion "problems of human environment" used here is understood to mean, on the one hand, the changes in the natural surroundings of man brought about, without adequate control, by the use of modern technological advances in industry and agriculture, and on the other hand, the impact of this process on man himself. Within the first category fall problems such as air and water pollution, erosion and/or depletion of the soil, excessive and uncontrolled use of biocides, problems of waste etc., and the disturbance of the ecological balance caused thereby. To the second category belong issues pertaining to health, working and living conditions as influenced by changes in the natural surroundings, unplanned and uncontrolled urban growth etc. With regard to the latter problem, the effects are both physical and psychological in nature. Mushrooming shantytowns and other types of slum areas, as well as rapid urban growth, cause not only air pollution, traffic congestions, a damaging level of noise and sharply increased accident rates, but also problems connected with family disorganization, mental tensions and increased crime rates.
3. The importance, indeed the urgency, of the problems of human environment is being increasingly recognized in developed and developing countries. In some developing countries the problems involved may not yet have become as serious in the short run as in the highly industrialized countries, but they are nowhere absent and will with certainty grow ever more serious with widespread use of modern technology. This is particularly true with regard to tropical regions with climatic and geological extremes where nature is often more sensitive to intervention by man than in temperate zones. Complex urbanization problems have already arisen in many developing countries.
4. A number of organizations within the United Nations have already engaged in the study of these issues. WHO has for some time been active in the field of water and air pollution. FAO has been concerned with the erosion and depletion of the soil and with the conservation of fishing grounds. UNESCO is interested in the

general problem of conservation of nature and is, in co-operation with other agencies, sponsoring a conference on the biosphere this coming September. The Economic and Social Council has had items concerning environmental pollution and the conservation of the environment on its agenda for some years and will at its current session deal with some highly illuminating reports prepared by WHO, FAO and UNESCO.

5. These activities are highly important and they deserve support and encouragement. However, they have not yet been given the prominence in the deliberations of the competent organs of the United Nations, in particular the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council, which is necessary if they are to have maximum impact on the practical actions of Governments and intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations. Furthermore, as the problems of human environment grow more serious every day, many of them involving the risk of irreparable damage if not dealt with in time, it will be necessary to extend and intensify international efforts already undertaken and to initiate new ones. There is, therefore, an indisputable need to create a basis for comprehensive consideration within the United Nations of the problems of human environment.

6. A decision to provide such a framework would serve the following purposes:

(a) It would focus the attention of Governments and public opinion in various countries on the importance of the problem. Even if members of the scientific community have become fully aware that changes in the human environment may involve serious threats to the welfare, indeed the survival, of man, the economic, social and political repercussions have not yet been fully realized by the public at large and by the policy-making authorities. Wider understanding of the problems involved would make such measures as have to be taken, be it on the national or the international level, more easily acceptable.

(b) Some aspects of the question are already under active consideration in various international organizations. Other aspects will no doubt be taken up for international discussion within the foreseeable future. Thus, there is need for a common outlook and direction as well as a measure of administrative co-ordination. The machinery of ACC can be used in this connexion. It is not foreseen that any institutional innovations would be required.

(c) It would be highly desirable to provide a meeting-ground where exchange of information and experience can take place between scientists, administrators, politicians and other persons engaged in various aspects of the matter.

(d) It is essential that those aspects of the problem that can only be solved through international co-operation and agreement be identified, particularly those that have to be dealt with as a matter of urgency if irreparable damage is to be avoided.

7. After careful consideration, the Swedish Government has arrived at the conclusion that the purposes stated above would best be served by a decision taken by the General Assembly of the United Nations to convene a conference under United Nations auspices. Such a conference would have to be most carefully prepared, possibly through the appointment of an ad hoc committee of the General Assembly to work in close collaboration with agencies now engaged in various aspects of the problem. The conference might take place in 1971.

8. It may be recalled that when, at its meeting in October 1967, the United Nations Scientific Advisory Committee considered the convening of a fourth United Nations conference on the peaceful uses of atomic energy, it was suggested that other topics might also lend themselves to United Nations conferences of this character, and the problem of human environment was singled out as one suitable subject. This idea was referred to by the Swedish delegation in an intervention in the plenary session of the General Assembly on 13 December 1967 (A/PV.1629, p. 72).

9. It is the intention of the Swedish delegation, should its request for the inscription of this item on the agenda of the Economic and Social Council at its forty-fifth session be granted, to place before the Council a draft resolution that will reflect the above considerations. The Swedish delegation also hopes that the Council will request the Secretariat to prepare background material in order to facilitate the consideration of the matter by the General Assembly.