



CONTENTS

|   |             |
|---|-------------|
| Agenda item 12:   | <i>Page</i> |
| Question of convening an international conference on problems of the human environment. . . . . | 103         |

*President:* Mr. PÉREZ GUERRERO (Venezuela).

AGENDA ITEM 12

**Question of convening an international conference on problems of the human environment (E/4466/Add.1, E/4553)**

1. M. ÅSTRÖM (Sweden) said that the quality of the human environment was a matter of direct concern to all human beings. Its components were deteriorating rapidly and plans must be made to avoid in the future the mistakes which had rendered so much of the environment unhealthy, unpleasant or ugly.

2. By using the natural resources around him, man changed his environment in order to improve his conditions of life. Many of the changes were lasting achievements of benefit to everybody; others were beneficial to small groups and made life difficult for the majority. At the same time, man's character was influenced by his natural surroundings, and any changes in them affected his mental and physical health. In some parts of the world destruction of the environment had begun and was increasing. Natural resources were being depleted and processes set in motion which, if unchecked, would cause drastic deterioration in the conditions of human life. The phenomenon was clearly visible in countries at an advanced stage of industrialization and urbanization, but the problem would become more serious as more countries reached that stage.

3. In earlier epochs when the conditions suitable for human life in a particular region were destroyed by human action, the population had moved on to another area. When the natural environment was destroyed today no emigration could solve the problem; there was no escape from the situation created by the depletion of resources and by disturbances caused to living creatures on the thin surface of the earth. The basic components of man's environment were fertile soil, fresh water of high quality and sufficiently abundant, the living oceans, and air of the right composition and at the right temperature. The quality of those four components was dependent upon living organisms ranging from the microscopic algae and soil microbes to the most developed forms of life, including man himself. The quality of the human environment was dependent upon the interaction of all those components. Nature regenerated itself, but if man intervened in the process beyond tolerable limits, nature was ruined and could not be regenerated.

4. Today, no new regions were available to replace areas affected by soil erosion, a phenomenon which varied according to the climatic zone. In the temperate zones erosion by wind, and the lowering of ground-water levels, were the most serious problems. In some highly industrialized regions water was consumed to such an extent that rain and snow replaced only one-third of what was used, and water scarcity was becoming common. The same problem occurred in tropical zones, but many tropical soils were even more sensitive than those of temperate areas. Once they were left without cover they rapidly became deserts.

5. Fresh water, lavishly provided in many temperate zones, had been regarded as inexhaustible, but the rich countries in those zones had treated water resources carelessly, using rivers and lakes as recipients for the unpurified waste of cities and industries. The deterioration of the fresh water supply had been accelerated by the use of synthetic detergents. At the same time, extensive use of water in cities and by industries had caused the ground-water level to sink dangerously low. In many countries, waste from the cities and industries was dumped into coastal waters, and oil from tankers and oil residues from other vessels was being discharged into the sea at an alarming rate. Certain species of fish were becoming extinct as a result of such disturbances created by man; their extinction could cause changes in ocean life which were difficult to predict. The problem should be examined urgently at the international level. Even greater disturbances of the living systems in the oceans were likely to be brought about by the persistence of the pesticide DDT, which remained active for many years after it had produced the desired result. DDT had been spread all over the earth by the winds, by the seas and by living creatures, and was found in the body fat and tissue of all living beings, including man. It had been estimated that one-thousandth of a gramme of DDT in 1,000 kg of water could lower the metabolism of the algae by 75 per cent. The life of the algae was directly threatened by the hundreds of thousands of tons of DDT spread over the continents every year, much of it finding its way into the oceans. Since algae supplied the atmosphere with three-quarters of its oxygen, the vitally important oxygen content of air might even be endangered. Algae were also the basic food for all marine organisms; a threat to their existence was a threat to life on the planet.

6. Air pollution was caused when fine particles transported by the winds became charged with the gaseous substances emitted from all kinds of combustion processes. Polluted particles seemed to be one of the major causes of increasing lung diseases such as cancer and chronic bronchitis. Careful planning and strict observance of certain rules were necessary if those hazards were to be limited or eliminated. The entry of enormous quantities of particles into the atmosphere might cause a cooling of the earth's surface by reflecting away some of the sun's rays. Conver-

sely, the burning of the fossil fuels stored in the earth's crust millions of years ago caused an increase in the carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. Carbon dioxide counteracted heat emission from the earth and might result in an increase of the earth's temperature. Whichever process prevailed, the temperature equilibrium of the earth was clearly being rendered unstable.

7. Noise was another problem, and it would become more acute when supersonic aircraft were introduced by civil airlines. Medical evidence showed that people could be damaged physically and mentally if exposed to strong intermittent noise for long periods. Millions of people might be subjected to intense noise in order to enable a relatively small number of travellers to reach their destinations a few hours earlier.

8. Rapid urbanization, bringing with it an increase in the population of cities, made environment problems immeasurably more difficult and complex. The lack of waste and pollution control in European cities at the end of the nineteenth century when their growth was greatest had created problems whose solution was extremely costly. Newly-industrialized nations should learn from the mistakes made by others and plan the development of their cities. Proper planning of the urban environment could also prevent the emotional stresses and social disturbances characteristic of many modern cities.

9. If economic development was to keep pace with the growing world population, all natural resources would have to be harnessed to the full, but the dangerous side-effects of their exploitation must be avoided. Rapid development was sometimes in conflict with preservation of the environment, but if a price had to be paid, man should proceed in full awareness of the consequences. The achievements of science and technology must be used for the improvement of the quality of human life. Economic growth was not an end in itself but should be used to satisfy basic human ends and to improve living and working conditions. Man could, if he wished, plan his own environment rationally in order to create a happier future for himself.

10. The specialized agencies were engaged on important work on environment problems. WHO had been actively studying the problems of water and air pollution; the report it had submitted to the Council at its forty-fourth session concerning environmental pollution and its control (E/4457 and Add.1) had been carefully studied by the Swedish Government. The report by UNESCO and FAO on the conservation and rational use of the environment (E/4458) was also very valuable. UNESCO, in co-operation with FAO and WHO, was organizing a conference on the biosphere, and various aspects of the problem were being studied by WMO, IAEA, IMCO and the ILO. Many Governments had introduced legislation designed to combat water and air pollution and soil erosion.

11. Sweden had come to the conclusion that a comprehensive discussion was needed within the United Nations covering all the problems involved, in order to encourage international organizations and Governments to intensify their efforts and to provide a common direction for their work. Scientists, administrators and

politicians actively engaged in studying the problems of the human environment could be given an opportunity to discuss their experiences at a conference, preferably with the active participation of representatives of the specialized agencies and interested non-governmental organizations. Very careful preparation would be required for such a conference, and the Council should propose the time and place, together with a programme of work. In particular, the conclusions and recommendations from the forthcoming conference on the biosphere would have to be taken into account. The timing would have to be decided in the light of the estimated length of the preparations and of the United Nations calendar of conferences. It might be appropriate to hold it in 1971. Early and energetic action was required if irreparable damage to the human environment was to be avoided; the price of postponement would be high.

12. Mr. HILL (Assistant Secretary-General for Inter-Agency Affairs) said that the Secretariat had attempted in document E/4553 to cover as far as possible the work of the various organizations and programmes relevant to the human environment problem. It did not cover everything being done, of course; nor did the space devoted to each organization or programme in the report always correspond to the actual importance of its work on the subject. The report laid special emphasis on work concerned with pollution; it also contained information on the effect of unplanned and uncontrolled urban growth on human health and on working and living conditions. Stress was laid on the inter-agency character of much of the work being done, and attention was drawn to the co-ordination work on marine pollution done by the ACC Sub-Committee on Marine Science and its Applications, and to the fact that an inter-agency meeting on environmental pollution had been held early in 1968.

13. Mr. GALLARDO MORENO (Mexico) said that his delegation endorsed the idea of a conference on the problems of the human environment, which should be held as soon as possible. As the Swedish representative had said, man could modify the conditions he himself had created. Mexico, for its part, was at present implementing a programme on the extent of urban zones.

14. Mr. LAUGIER (France) said that the list in document E/4553 of the activities in the matter of the human environment being undertaken by bodies belonging to the United Nations family should be supplemented as soon as possible by an inventory of the relevant work being done in the various countries which were Members of the Organization. Clearly, the research work and studies being carried out on the problems of the human environment were becoming increasingly important in the evolution of modern civilization and in attempts to improve the living standards of all the peoples of the world.

15. It was worth while recalling that some of the earliest and best efforts of the United Nations had been undertaken to improve human well-being. On the first day of its existence the General Assembly had voted credits for special projects; and the achievements of UNICEF, universally recognized and applauded, proved that the

United Nations could be more than a talking shop and could carry out realistic work.

16. Five years previously he had said that the mastery of the climate by man should be a priority objective of long-term international research with a view to ridding the world of hunger. Since then, much research had been done, and as a result of experiments in outer space and the work done in connexion with the World Weather Watch, man's knowledge of climatic conditions had greatly increased. Indeed it was not unreasonable to think that one day man would be able to regulate the weather. Unfortunately, a large part of the research being done was concentrated on subjects relating to human combat.

17. Currently mankind was living in an environment created by nature and atmospheric circumstances, but all the components of the environment, such as the chemical composition of air, its temperature and its pressure could be changed by man, by the action of Governments. Hitherto, modifications to the environment had been mostly adverse in their effect; an effort should be made to bring about changes which would benefit mankind. Several countries had already undertaken work to discover the effects of the modification of the environment on the growth and evolution of plants. Similar research should be undertaken to discover how environmental modifications could be put to the service of all animals, but particularly of mammals and, eventually, of human beings. A laboratory designed for that specific purpose was nearing completion at the University of Strasbourg. But research should not be centred on the physical environment only. The possibilities resulting from the revolution in audio-visual techniques which enabled human beings the world over to maintain contact with each other should also be developed for the benefit of mankind.

18. Before concluding, he wished in his personal capacity to make two comments on the activities of the United Nations. First, the time seemed to have come for the United Nations and its specialized agencies to embark on an exercise of self-criticism with a view to assessing the value of their endeavours. The fact that men, women and children were still being killed in wars and still dying of hunger meant that after twenty-two years of existence the United Nations was not yet strong enough to ensure that peace and social justice reigned in the world. An effort should be made to review the Charter of the Organization, in accordance with Article 109, with a view to strengthening its possibilities and means of action.

19. Secondly, the manner in which co-ordination activities were developing within the Organization was disquieting. ACC was competent to deal with all matters relating to the administration of the United Nations and the specialized agencies, but not to deal with, or take decisions on, substantive matters. In particular, it was not competent to allocate priorities as between the various specialized agencies, whose programmes and priorities should be decided by Governments. It was disturbing, therefore, to discover that sub-committees of ACC were being established to deal with substantive questions. It was interesting to note, in that connexion, the growing

conviction throughout the world of the need to establish non-governmental, non-secretariat bodies of independent, international thinkers to deal with specific problems. The establishment of the United Nations Scientific Advisory Committee was an example of the application of that idea. It was completely independent, indeed it would fail in its mission unless it jealously safeguarded its independence from government interference and the ambitions of a co-ordinating secretariat. He hoped that that Committee would be requested to examine in depth all problems relating to the human environment.

20. Mr. BRADLEY (Argentina) thought that a conference on the problems of the human environment should undoubtedly be convened; man should learn how to use his intelligence for his advancement rather than for his destruction. The Argentine delegation supported the Swedish proposals.

21. Mr. VARELA (Panama) said that, as indicated in paragraph 6 of document E/4553, United Nations bodies had already started, although in an unco-ordinated manner, to deal with the problems of the human environment. But unless all the work on the subject already being done by the various organizations and agencies had been previously co-ordinated, it was doubtful whether a conference held in 1971 would yield fruitful results. Paragraph 17 of document E/4553 indicated that the ECE Meeting of Governmental Experts on Problems relating to Environment to be held in Czechoslovakia in 1970 or 1971 would be preceded by a meeting of a Preparatory Group of Experts on Environment to ensure its success. Panama agreed that the conference proposed by the Swedish delegation should be held, but doubted whether 1971 was a suitable date. There was a danger that if it followed too closely on the ECE Meeting and unless it were adequately prepared, it would yield no practical or positive results.

22. Mr. ÅSTRÖM (Sweden) explained that he had merely suggested 1971 as being apparently the earliest possible date at which the conference could be held. The Swedish delegation was prepared, at the appropriate time, to consider suggestions for other dates.

23. Mr. BRUNI CELLI (Venezuela) agreed that a conference on the problems of the human environment should be held. It was the duty of the United Nations to promote research into such problems and to encourage governmental and non-governmental bodies to continue their activities on the subject. In addition, Governments should be given an opportunity to exchange views on the matter. As the body responsible for co-ordinating United Nations activities, the Economic and Social Council should first approve the idea of a conference and then settle questions relating to the place, date and agenda, with due regard to the principle that there should be only one major United Nations conference a year.

24. Mr. ALLEN (United Kingdom) said that the Council should pay greater attention to the important problem of the human environment in all its various aspects. Much work was being done on the subject by Govern-

ments, universities, industrial organizations and firms, private institutions and non-governmental organizations, and it would indeed be difficult for the United Nations to turn a blind eye to the problem.

25. However, an international conference of the kind proposed by Sweden would obviously have to deal with a vast range of scientific topics, and delegations to it would have to include experts in a large number of fields. Hence it was uncertain whether any generally valid conclusions could be drawn on the many topics that would have to be tackled. Many, if not most, of the various aspects of the general problem were already being studied by specialist bodies, and his delegation was not convinced that joint consideration of the findings would justify the time, effort and money that would be entailed for the United Nations and Member Governments. It was questionable whether the Council was as yet in a position to take a basic decision of the kind suggested by the Swedish delegation, since neither Governments nor the specialized agencies had had sufficient time to ponder the matter as a whole. Nor was it certain whether a large-scale conference offered the best opportunity of achieving the rather limited goals described by the Swedish representative.

26. He had been impressed by the Panamanian representative's arguments and he suggested that the objectives of the conference might be attained equally well in some less ambitious way, e.g. through a United Nations declaration on the subject. As the Council could not reach a sound decision except on the basis of a very careful study, his delegation considered that it should request the Secretary-General to commission a full-scale study of the matter by the various organizations concerned, covering perhaps the relationship between man and his environment in various fields such as agriculture, town planning, health, natural resources and industrialization, and presenting suggestions for consideration by a conference of the type proposed along with methods suitable for tackling the problems involved. The study might also list the various topics that could usefully be studied by a conference, and might be submitted to the Council for consideration at its 1969 summer session. Governments would probably require at least six weeks beforehand to study the document carefully. The Council could then decide whether to recommend the convening of a full-scale conference or other alternative procedure, or merely a conference to consider certain specific problems of the human environment only. In any event, it would be some time before the date of such a conference could be decided upon.

27. He hoped that by 1969 the Secretary-General would be able to inform the Council concerning the type of problems being encountered in various fields, the nature of the work already being carried out and any gaps in that work, at the same time indicating what a general conference could do to promote a better understanding of the problems involved and the lines along which they should be tackled.

28. Mr. FORTHOMME (Belgium) agreed that the Council need a clearer picture of the problem under consideration before it could reach a decision. Unless detailed

studies were carried out, the proposed conference could not be given clear-cut terms of reference and might be tempted to suggest the creation of yet another international body to deal with problems of the human environment. In his view, the main purpose of a conference of the type proposed should be to bring home to public opinion at all levels the danger of the deterioration of the human environment. For that reason it should be dramatized and not become enmeshed in technicalities. Before any decision on convening a conference was taken, however, the Council should decide what subjects were to be studied, what its terms of reference should be, and how it could best achieve its objectives.

29. His delegation did not agree that the Secretary-General should be asked to undertake yet another voluminous study, since a large amount of information was already available on the subject and conclusions could be drawn from the results of the work of the specialized agencies active in that field.

30. Mr. de SILVA (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) referred to UNESCO's work on scientific problems of the environment and the conservation of natural resources as described in paragraphs 51 to 52 of document E/4553, and drew particular attention to paragraphs 59 and 60 concerning the biosphere Conference to be convened by UNESCO. In cooperation with FAO, UNESCO had recently prepared a report on the conservation and rational use of the environment (E/4458) which, unfortunately, had not been considered by the Council at its forty-fourth session for lack of time. That report, together with the recommendations it contained, was of considerable importance in connexion with any future action on a wider scale, such as the Swedish delegation's proposal. WHO had also prepared a report on environmental pollution and its control (E/4457 and Add.1) for that same session of the Council.

31. He described the preparatory work for the biosphere Conference, which was to tackle many of the problems that would be covered by the conference proposed by the Swedish delegation. The Director-General of UNESCO had stated on a number of occasions that the biosphere conference was merely the first stage in a long-term effort requiring co-operation by the various bodies in the United Nations system. For that reason, he considered that a conference would sooner or later have to be convened by the United Nations on the important problem of the human environment. However, the Director-General agreed with the Swedish delegation (E/4466/Add.1, para. 6(b)) that such a conference should not imply the establishment of permanent machinery or a new body. The Council might be well advised to await the results of the biosphere Conference before reaching any decision as to date or agenda for the proposed conference. He hoped that, at a later stage, the Council would give detailed consideration to the aforementioned reports of UNESCO and FAO and WHO, as well as to the report of the biosphere Conference.

32. Mr. BENLER (Turkey) said that his delegation supported the general objectives of a conference such as

that proposed by the Swedish delegation. Its value would be immeasurably increased, however, if its work could be related to the promotion of economic development and emphasize the influence of the human environment on rural communities. At the same time, his delegation to some extent shared the concern expressed by the Belgian and United Kingdom representatives concerning the value of the proposed conference, whose success could be ensured only if detailed preparations were made well in advance.

33. Mr. YOKOTA (Japan) said that urgent and comprehensive measures were required to tackle the serious problems raised by the deterioration of the human environment. However, in view of the vast scope and the numerous aspects of the whole problem, his delegation was not at all convinced that it could best be tackled at a conference of the type proposed. Moreover, as the nature of the problem differed from country to country and region to region, a conference could do no more than draw attention to the gravity of the situation, and the general objectives could perhaps be best achieved if the Council adopted a resolution requesting the specialized agencies to strengthen their activities in that field and to co-operate more closely. Alternatively, a United Nations declaration on the matter could be formulated.

34. The proliferation of meetings and conferences should be avoided, and the effort and money spent on them could be better used by countries or international organizations in carrying out practical programmes of action. If, however, the Council decided that such a conference should be convened, its agenda should be drawn up with great care, and detailed preparatory work should be carried out in co-operation with all the agencies and organizations concerned.

35. Mr. BRILLANTES (Philippines) agreed on the importance of problems of the human environment, on which most valuable work was already being done. However, in view of the immense scope and the many aspects of the subject, the Council should avoid embarking upon what was tantamount to a study of man and the world as a whole. Any activities undertaken in that field should not be at the expense of United Nations programmes in other fields, such as the development of the developing countries. For that reason a conference on the human environment convened by the United Nations should be preceded by detailed preparatory work, and he hoped that the Swedish representative would be able to suggest how such work could best be undertaken.

The meeting rose at 1.5 p.m.