

**STATEMENT TO THE COMMISSION ON  
POPULATION AND DEVELOPMENT  
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By

**Joseph Chamie**  
Director  
Population Division  
Department of Economic and Social Affairs

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**UNITED NATIONS**

Mr. Chairman, Mr. Desai, Ms. Obaid, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Since its inception more than a half-century ago, a central concern of this Commission has been the following question: How should the international community of nations proceed in addressing population and development issues? This morning I would like to focus on this question because in the coming days this Commission will be making decisions on follow-up activities to the International Conference on Population and Development.

In making today's decisions, the Commission, I believe, may benefit from a review of yesterday's accomplishments as well as some reflection on the likely trends of tomorrow. Accordingly, in the next few minutes I would like to provide the Commission with first a brief account of the past efforts and progress of the United Nations in the area of population and development, and second, a vision of world population trends during the coming decades.

Shortly after the founding of the United Nations, this Commission was established by the Economic and Social Council. At that time, world population was around 2.3 billion and gaining roughly 40 million people per year.

In the early 1950s, there was discussion and considerable debate about whether the United Nations should convene an international conference on population and development. At the time, the climate was not right. Governments were not at all prepared to take up such sensitive issues in a global, inter-governmental format.

As a result, the first United Nations conference on population and development, held in Rome in 1954, was a scientific gathering and was certainly a big step forward at that time. Approximately 600 scientists from around the world gathered in Rome to examine the needs and requirements necessary to establish statistical and demographic systems around the world. The Rome Conference emphasized the importance of the collection of data to facilitate population and related research; it also emphasized the need for economic and technical assistance to developing countries to establish accurate and comprehensive databases.

A decade later, the population and development climate at the United Nations remained basically unchanged. Although the first conference was a step forward, the issues were still too sensitive and controversial for many Governments. Accordingly, the second United Nations conference, held in Belgrade in 1965, was also a scientific gathering. However this time, several thousand professionals participated in technical sessions covering a wide spectrum of population and development issues. Several of these sessions, focused on fertility and family planning, which up to that time were not topics of discussion at United Nations meetings. An important conclusion of the 1965 Belgrade Conference was that fertility was a critical factor in social and economic development.

At the end of the 1960s, world population had reached 3.7 billion, and it was growing at an unprecedented 2 per cent per year, which remains the all time record for world population growth.

By this time, the climate at the United Nations had changed dramatically. The world community of nations was now ready to take up population and development. In 1974, the first United Nations

intergovernmental world conference on population and development was held in Bucharest.

This first global conference of Governments in Bucharest was certainly a major achievement. At that conference, the groundbreaking World Population Plan of Action was adopted. Among other things, the Plan stressed the urgency of accelerating social and economic development and the need to bring about a new international economic order. In addition, many of the principles that we now take as given were formally adopted in Bucharest. For example, the World Population Plan of Action established the principle that all couples and individuals have the basic right to decide freely and responsibly the number and spacing of their children and to have the information, education and means to do so. It also stated the principle that women have the right to complete integration in the development process particularly by means of equal access to education and equal participation in social, economic, cultural and political life.

A decade later, the political climate at the United Nations continued to reflect concern with population and development issues. Accordingly, the second United Nations intergovernmental conference on population and development was held in Mexico City in 1984. The major goals of the Mexico City Conference were to review the World Population Plan of Action and make recommendations for their further implementation. By this time, most developing countries had actively embraced many of the principles and recommendations adopted a decade earlier in Bucharest.

At the start of the 1990s, world population had reached 5 billion and was adding 87 million people annually, which is an all time record for world population increase.

In September 1994, the third United Nations intergovernmental conference on population and development was held in Cairo. The International Conference on Population and Development adopted the Programme of Action. The Programme of Action contains a large number of innovations, with new issues, new approaches and new activities. Perhaps one of the greatest contributions of the Cairo Programme of Action was the expansion of agreed language. The widespread acceptance of the language in the Programme of Action helped to facilitate consensus on a set of norms that are increasingly being embraced by both Governments and people all over world.

Mr. Chairman, now I would like to turn the Commission's attention from past achievements and move to likely future trends. On various occasions, including to this Commission, I have attempted to provide a likely picture of tomorrow's world population. This morning I would like to present it in a slightly different manner.

For some time, I have noticed that nearly everyone, including even young children, follows and easily understands weather forecasts, which appear daily in newspapers and are broadcast regularly on radio and television. Perhaps, it might be helpful, and refreshing, to present future population trends in a manner similar to weather forecasts. Well, here is one attempt to do so; it is entitled:

## The Five Decade Forecast

The general outlook for the world for this afternoon and the next five decades is for:

- persistent demographic accumulation, especially in urban areas in the south;
- declining fertility trends;
- widespread ageing;
- continuing broad bands of migration streams;
- and scattered mortality disturbances.

Today, world population has hit an all time high of 6.2 billion people. The record of 6 billion was set in 1999, only 12 years after the earlier high of 5 billion in 1987. Current demographic accumulation is 77 million people per year, again lower than the record high of 87 million reached at the end of the 1980s.

The current global forecast for the year 2050 is some 9 billion people, but also possible is a high of 11 billion or a low of 8 billion.

Reports from national centres supplemented by computer estimates show a current global growth rate of 1.2 percent, markedly lower than the all time record high of 2 per cent set back in the late 1960s. A more detailed look across the globe shows considerable variability, regionally and nationally, as well as significant demographic turbulence in some areas.

Nearly all of the global demographic accumulation during the next five decades -around 3 billion people - is expected to occur in the Southern Hemisphere. This accumulation will likely amount to an increase of 67 per cent for the less developed regions by mid-century. Today six countries - India, China, Pakistan, Nigeria, Bangladesh and Indonesia - account for half of the world's yearly demographic accumulation. India's annual accumulation, one-fifth of global growth, is equal to the combined totals for China, Pakistan and Nigeria.

In contrast, most areas in the Northern Hemisphere will see little if any accumulation. And some places, such as Italy, Germany, Japan and Russia, are likely to experience demographic shortfalls. Notable exceptions, however, are Australia, Canada and the United States, which are expected to have demographic accumulations of 30 to 40 percent by the end of the five decades, due in large part to continuing streams of migration.

Fertility trends are headed downward in all regions. A depressed fertility system - below normal replacement levels of two births per woman - covers nearly half of the world's population, with European countries and Japan experiencing the lowest recorded fertility levels, i.e., 1.1 to 1.5 births per woman. A reversal of these unseasonably low fertility levels is unlikely during the next few decades. While fertility remains high in most of Africa and parts of Western and South Asia, these levels are beginning to fall, especially in urban areas. By the end of the five-decade forecast, global fertility is expected to hover around replacement.

Scattered mortality disturbances, heavy at times, will occur mainly in Africa and Asia. Isolated disturbances will also occur in Eastern Europe. Elevated levels of mortality will result in life expectancies at birth stalling, or even falling in some less developed countries. A rapidly moving, high-pressure HIV/AIDS epidemic is causing a mortality tsunami, ravaging much of sub-Saharan Africa and some parts

of South and East Asia. Other areas in Eastern Europe and Asia are now reported to be reaching dangerously high levels and advisories remain in effect everywhere. All are strongly advised to take preventive measures, especially groups at high-risk. While the disturbances are expected to subside, their aftershocks will linger in many countries.

Broad bands of migration streams, some undocumented, will persist and possibly intensify. The streams are moving primarily from the south in a northerly direction and also from east to west. In addition, there will be continued migration activity within countries, with increasing numbers seeking shelter in large cities, especially along the seacoasts.

As a result of falling fertility and increasing longevity, a widespread ageing front is rapidly sweeping across the globe. This front, travelling from west to east and beginning in Europe, will result in extraordinary shifts in age structures towards the elevated ages. These shifts will exert considerable pressures on social, economic and political conditions in all countries, especially in the north. The pressures from this ageing front are expected to precipitate political squalls. They are also likely to produce unpleasant conditions, such as higher retirement ages, lower social security benefits and increased worker contributions. The migration streams noted earlier are expected to do little to reduce the pressures from the enormous and rapidly expanding ageing front.

The extended long-term forecast remains unsettled. While the forecast for some areas is partly sunny, unstable conditions are expected to persist in many regions for some time. Scattered clouds are also forming on the horizon due to intensifying ageing, mortality disturbances and migration streams.

Mr. Chairman, this morning I have attempted to provide the Commission with an overview of the past and indication of the likely future. Hindsight provides a perspective on past efforts and achievements; foresight offers a vision of what is likely to develop in the future. Both are vital ingredients for making appropriate and policy-relevant decisions.

Certainly, much has happened over the last five decades. Nevertheless, much work lies ahead. In all likelihood, for instance, the world's population will be 3 billion larger by mid-century. Also, population ageing, international migration, urbanization and various mortality setbacks are raising new challenges and concerns.

This Commission continues to have a critical role to play in the international debate on population and development. The Population and Development Commission has the important responsibility to keep population and development on the intergovernmental agenda in order to deal with new and emerging issues. This Commission has demonstrated courage and boldness in addressing major population and development challenges. Its invaluable leadership and guidance to the world community has contributed to remarkable progress during the past five decades. It has done this largely by keeping the international community visibly mobilized and committed to addressing population and development issues. This tradition needs to continue into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Clearly, the choices and decisions taken in the next few days will influence the wellbeing of current and future generations.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.