

**STATEMENT TO THE COMMISSION ON  
POPULATION AND DEVELOPMENT  
(Thirty-seventh session)**

By

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

New York  
22 March 2004



**UNITED NATIONS**

Mr. Chairman, Mr. Ocampo, Ms. Obaid, Mr. Chowdhury, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Since its establishment in 1946, this Commission has been concerned with one of the defining features of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: the unprecedented growth of world population. This growth has significantly affected the course of life and the environment on this planet. Consider, for example, that at the time of the Commission's first session the total population of the world was 2.3 billion people. Today this figure amounts to the combined populations of two countries: China and India.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century ushered in the world's most rapid rates of population growth. World population nearly quadrupled during the past century, with most of this growth – 80 per cent- taking place during the tenure of this Commission. Moreover, the 20<sup>th</sup> century ushered in revolutionary changes in life expectancy, child bearing, the family, ageing and migration.

Inspired and guided by this Commission, the United Nations responded to these challenges in a variety of ways. Most notable perhaps, the United Nations convened five global population conferences over the past five decades. As early as 1954, the United Nations organized in Rome the first global conference dealing with population and development issues. At this scientific gathering, the opening statement of Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld included the following remark: "Thus, the situation in which we find ourselves constitutes one of the greatest challenges that has ever faced the world."

A decade later, the United Nations convened a second scientific population conference in Belgrade. As in the Rome Conference, the concerns of the 1965 Belgrade conference were focused on improving the lives and welfare of men, women and children, especially in the less developed regions. The representative of Secretary-General U Thant remarked in his opening statement to the conference: "If we are not to fall hopelessly behind our goals, there must be a new commitment, of Governments and of the people."

Less than a decade later in 1974, the United Nations convened the first global, intergovernmental population conference in Bucharest. At that conference, the groundbreaking World Population Plan of Action was adopted by consensus. 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.

Ten years later in 1984, the second United Nations intergovernmental population conference was held in Mexico City. The major goals of the Mexico City conference were to review the World Population Plan of Action and make recommendations for their further implementation.

In September 1994, the United Nations convened the third intergovernmental conference on population and development in Cairo. The theme of the Cairo conference was population, sustained economic growth and sustainable development, and the conference adopted the Programme of Action. As in past conferences, the Cairo conference was primarily concerned with improving the lives and welfare of men, women and children throughout the world.

In 2004, at this 37<sup>th</sup> session, the Commission is focusing its attention on the progress achieved in the

implementation of the Programme of Action. In doing so, it is also considering what should be the next steps in effectively addressing the wide spectrum of population and development issues facing the international community of nations.

Today the population of the world is 6.4 billion. This figure is 4 billion people more than the population of the world at the time of the Commission's first session.

What about the future? What kind of future will the new century bring? By definition, the future is unknown. However, certain population outcomes are highly likely, or at least more likely than others. According to United Nations projections, the major features of future world population, at least by mid-century, may be summarized by ten major trends.

**First, world population will be larger.** At least 2 billion additional inhabitants, and perhaps closer to 3 billion more people are expected to be added to the world over the next five decades. According to the medium variant projection, world population will reach nearly 9 billion by mid-century. This projected increase of nearly 3 billion people by 2050 is the second highest half-century increase in recorded human history. The record-setting 3.5 billion was added to the world between 1950 and 2000.

**Second, world population growth will be slower.** In terms of absolute growth, the peak of about 87 million occurred in the late 1980s. The current annual increase of world population is about 77 million. By mid-century the world is expected to be adding 29 million annually, or about a third of today's increase.

**Third, more of the world's population will be concentrated in less developed countries.** By 2050, nearly 90 per cent of world population is expected to be living in less developed nations versus 80 per cent today. This is due to the fact that about 95 per cent of the world's future population growth will be taking place in the less developed regions. Today, for example, six countries account for half of the world's annual growth: India, China, Pakistan, Nigeria, Bangladesh and Indonesia.

**Fourth, fertility levels will be lower and family sizes smaller.** Fertility levels have come down markedly during the 20<sup>th</sup> century in virtually every region of the world. For example, whereas in the 1950s women in the less developed regions were having an average of six children, today they are having three children on average. By mid-century, the global fertility average is anticipated to be close to replacement levels of around two children per couple. Currently, 61 countries have achieved fertility levels below replacement and by 2050, some 90 more are expected to do so.

**Fifth, the populations of many nations will be smaller.** By mid-century the populations of one country out of five, i.e., 43 countries, are expected to be smaller than today. Prominent among these countries is the Russian Federation, Ukraine, Japan and Italy. In addition, the population of Europe peaked several years ago and is now declining. These projected declines are primarily due to the expected continuation of below replacement fertility. By 2050, the sum of these projected declines is about 143 million people less than currently residing in these 43 countries.

**Sixth, life expectancy will be higher in most countries.** With modern medicines, changes in life styles and improved nutrition, lower mortality rates are foreseen, with longer life than currently imagined. By mid-century, global life expectancy is projected to be about 10 years more than today, i.e., reaching 76 years, and the number of people aged 100 years or older will likely be in excess of 3 million, which is a twenty-fold increase over the number today.

**Seventh, the impact of the HIV/AIDS epidemic is expected to worsen in certain regions.** At least for the next several decades, this tragic epidemic will lead to increased morbidity, mortality and population loss for the currently most affected countries. Although the probability of being infected by HIV is expected to decline markedly in the future, the long-term impact of the epidemic remains dire.

**Eighth, world population will be older.** The per cent 65 years or older is expected to more than double over the next five decades, increasing from 7 per cent to 16 per cent. In forty-six countries, one person out of four is expected to be 65 years or older by mid-century. Also, the number of persons of working age for each older person will be cut in half. For many countries, this will likely mean, among other things, a combination of higher ages at retirement, reduced benefits for the elderly and higher taxes for the working population.

**Ninth, the world will be more urbanized.** Most of the world's population growth is taking place in urban areas of the less developed regions. Within just a couple of years, the majority of the world will no longer be rural dwellers as has been the case throughout human history, but will be urban dwellers. Also, within 25 years, urban areas in less developed regions are expected to double in size, growing from 1.9 billion today to 3.9 billion by 2030.

**Tenth, international migration will increase both in volume and impact.** International migration flows are expected to remain high during the 21st century. The more developed regions are expected to continue being net receivers of international migration, with an average gain of at least 2 million per year over the coming half century. Today, the populations of many developed countries already rely on international migration for their modest growth. Because of their very low fertility levels, international migration will have an increasingly significant impact on population growth in the more developed regions as well as giving rise to further ethnic diversity within these countries.

Looking even further into the future, the question arises of whether the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be the end of rapid world population growth. In my view, the most likely answer to this question is "yes".

Increases in world population in the second half of this century will likely be smaller than for the first half. Also, the most recent long-range projections of the United Nations anticipate, according to the medium scenario, that world population will likely peak at slightly above 9 billion near the close of this century. As may be observed from the table below, this latest medium variant figure for world population stabilization is considerable lower than past United Nations long-range projections. For example, some 30 years ago, the projected stabilization level of world population was slightly above 12 billion people.

Mr. Chairman,

The 20<sup>th</sup> century was a century of profound and unprecedented population growth and change. The challenges of the past were faced squarely and early on by the distinguished members of this Commission. Among other things, this Commission initiated the convening of a series of five crucial population conferences that adopted principles, plans and programmes to address critical population issues of today and tomorrow.

As has been the case in the past, this Commission has a vital role to play in the international debate on population and development. The General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council as well as other United Nations bodies will continue to turn to this Commission for explanation and guidance concerning population and development issues. Bold vision and strong leadership from the distinguished members of this Commission, coupled with international cooperation and commitment, will greatly enhance the ability of the United Nations to contribute to making the world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century a much better place for the generations of today as well as tomorrow.

Thank you very much.

**UNITED NATIONS LONG-RANGE WORLD POPULATION PROJECTIONS**  
(in billions)

<i>Based on Revision of</i>	<i>Issued in</i>	<i>Medium Variant Stabilization (year)</i>	<i>High Variant (year)</i>	<i>Low Variant (year)</i>
1968 .....	1974	12.2 (2075)	15.8 (2075)	9.5 (2075)
1973 .....	1977	11.0 (2125)	14.0 (2125)	8.8 (2125)
1978 .....	1981	10.5 (2100)	14.1 (2100)	8.0 (2100)
1980 .....	1982	10.2 (2100)	14.9 (2100)	7.2 (2100)
1990 .....	1992	11.6 (2200)	28.0 (2150)	4.3 (2150)
1996 .....	1998	11.0 (2200)	27.0 (2150)	3.5 (2150)
1998 .....	2000	10.0 (2200)	24.8 (2150)	3.2 (2150)
2002 .....	2004	9.0 (2300)	36.4 (2300)	2.3 (2300)

*Source:* United Nations, DESA, Population Division, various publications.