

**Statement to the Commission on Population and Development
Acting as Preparatory Committee for the Special Session
of the General Assembly**

As written



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*Statement by
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*at the
U.N. General Assembly Special Session/Preparatory Committee*

Presentation of the Outcome of The Hague Forum

New York

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PRESIDENT OF THE HAGUE FORUM

PRESENTATION OF THE OUTCOME OF THE HAGUE FORUM
NEW YORK, 24 MARCH 1999

It is a great pleasure for me to present the outcome of The Hague Forum, which happened between 8 and 12 February. We had a rich discussion, especially in the Main Committee under the very able chairmanship of Ambassador Anwarul Karim Chowdhury. Our discussions were free from the tension and controversy we had in Cairo. This means that there is an overwhelming worldwide consensus on how to deal in a decent fashion with the population problem.

I will not go through the Findings and Proposed Actions with you, because you have all read it, so that would be a waste of time. I would rather like to give you my own account of three items which, though not entirely new, received a lot of attention at the Forum: Youth, AIDS and Resources.

As to **youth** - there is a chapter about Adolescents in the Cairo Programme of Action, but it was not one of the main items there. This time, youth was everywhere, both physically and as a focus of attention. They had their own Forum in advance of ours, and many of them stayed on. It is clear that the 1.1 billion-people between 15 and 24 years, the biggest mass of young people ever, are finding their voice, and are being recognized as a source of both opportunity and danger, primarily to themselves. Many of these 1.1 billion are still under-informed, under-educated and under-served in the field of sexual and reproductive health. This means they are running a

disproportional risk of catching HIV/AIDS and STDs and of having unwanted pregnancies. Whatever we can do for them, and what they can do for themselves and for one another, will make a great difference for the rest of their lives and for the future of the planet. It is necessary to involve their families in their sexual education; however, many of these kids do not have a family, and many parents do not know how to discuss the subject or do not dare to. Especially where children do not have parents or where parents abdicate their rightful role, Governments have a responsibility. I feel that the schools have a task here, that sexual education should be mandatory, because obviously it cannot all be left to the family; and that we and the adolescents themselves have to find innovative ways to spread the word. As to the idea that sexual education leads to promiscuity - research has proven that this once apparently legitimate fear is unfounded. It lacks a basis in fact. Fear of pregnancy and STDs does not lead the kids to keeping their virginity. Virtue grows out of conviction, not out of ignorance. But ignorance and lack of protection can imply a death sentence. Our children have a right to know and to protect their health.

Which leads me to **AIDS**. The pandemic has grown now to between 35 and 40 million people, and this problem also received more attention than in Cairo, both because of the gigantic scale of human suffering imposed on the victims and their families and because of the economic havoc it causes in many developing countries.

Eleven people are being infected every minute. Apart from abstinence, which provides 100% protection but seems in many cases to be a remote ideal, the only known and immediately available prevention is the condom. Let us for a moment consider the consequences of the absence of this means of prevention. Who will be

condemned to death by AIDS? First, those who have sex outside their own home. Many of us dislike this, and some consider it a sin. But should it be punished by death? Next: is it fair for a monogamous woman to be infected by her unfaithful husband because he does not use condoms and she cannot make him use them? It happens all the time. How about young girls - in a number of African countries the incidence of HIV is 16 times higher in young girls than it is in boys the same age, because they get it from the older men.

Is this fair?

As far as there are still financial, cultural and religious barriers to the distribution and use of condoms, they have to come down. And they are coming down. The Hague document launches an appeal to Governments to fully realize their Cairo commitment at least for the struggle against HIV/AIDS. I hope this will be confirmed by this PrepCom.

Which brings me to **resources**. Resources were the third item that got a lot of attention in The Hague, and with good reason, 'for if we are all agreed on what we should do about population and reproductive health and if the techniques are there, as seems to be the case, then the main constraint at this stage is money.' The Programme of Action estimates an annual need of roughly USD 17 billion, but only about half of that has been found proportionally more in developing countries than among the donors. It would be tragic if a shortfall of USD 8.5 billion would make our effort a failure instead of a success. USD 8.5 billion is, in terms of financial transactions worldwide, an insignificant amount. Yet it seems to be difficult to find. I do not think it would be effective to try and apportion blame for this. Developing countries have

many competing claims on their meagre resources, and some of them have not yet fully realized that population and reproductive health is one of the best investment areas around, in purely economic terms. The developed world has more and more rich countries with poor Governments, as a diminishing proportion of resources flows through Government channels. Still, they would already make an important contribution if they rearranged their priorities somewhat to spend 4% of their existing ODA on population; a target adopted at the Amsterdam Conference in 1989. And while discussing resources, do not let us forget the core funding for UNFPA. They play a very central role in the implementation of Cairo. The applause that Nafis regularly receives is very well-deserved, but it is not fully effective without the necessary financial underpinning.

But, without in any way relieving Governments of their own responsibilities to finance the implementation of Cairo, we will have to look in other directions as well. Since we are here in New York, in the capital of Capitalism, let us consider whether the private business sector could not consider enhancing its contribution. This possibility is mentioned almost in passing in the Findings and Proposals, but I think we will hear more about it. Many companies wish to spend some funds on socially relevant causes, both for the sake of those causes and to enhance their reputation as pillars of society. I venture that support for population projects in developing countries and countries in transition is a very worthy cause for private businesses, whether through sponsoring or contributions to funds - their own or others - or otherwise. They would at the same time work for the realisation of human rights, and help deciding whether in the end our small earth will carry 9, 12 or 15 billion people. That is a powerful message to the business world. Some of the biggest businessmen

in the world have already given the example. I feel there is an opportunity here which deserves to be thoroughly explored during the next five years.

Youth, AIDS and Resources were, of course, far from being the only items discussed. The issue of women's health and rights came through as loud and clear as in Cairo. The role of the Non- Governmental Organizations was stressed time and again, and a number of their suggestions were taken over from the final declaration of the NGO Forum that preceded the governmental one. Abortion went back to where it should always have been: a largely preventable cause of maternal death when performed under unsafe circumstances. The anxiety about the still unsustainable population growth going on in too many countries, though pervasive, remained largely implicit. Migration again seemed to be a bit outside the attention span of most delegations, and may require separate treatment elsewhere. The same applies to poverty and its causes, the debt problem, and the environment; even though the linkages with population were generally recognized. Ageing is coming toward us a major issue, and will no doubt be treated more fully in the future.

All in all, I think we took the debate in The Hague as far as we could. I hope you will find useful material in the Findings and Proposed Actions. It is now up to the PrepCom to give the process a solid basis for the next five years.. Given the existing consensus, that should be possible.

I wish you luck.