

As written

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

by

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UNITED NATIONS

Mr. Chairman,
Mr. Desai,
Dr. Sadik,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you. I would like to begin by extending my greetings and welcome to the distinguished delegates, representatives, observers and all others who are participating in the thirty-second session of the Commission on Population and Development.

I would also like to express my congratulations to you, Mr. Chairman. I believe that you are one of the few members of the Commission who has attended all the three intergovernmental population conferences held so far, Bucharest in 1974, Mexico City in 1984, and Cairo in 1994. We will benefit from your considerable experience. Also, I would like to congratulate the other distinguished members elected to the Bureau for this Commission. My colleagues and I stand ready to assist you and the Commission in its vital work.

Mr. Chairman, this Commission is marking its 53rd year, having been established in October of 1946, with a membership of 12 Member States. Throughout this 53 year period, which has been demographically unprecedented in the history of humanity, this Commission has been the primary international forum for building consensus on population and development issues among nations of the world. It is a body where population issues of fundamental concern for individuals, families, communities and nations may be debated objectively, comprehensively and with respect to differing views and perspectives.

The present session of this Commission is especially important. Not only will the Commission conduct its regular work, but it will also serve in open ended session as the preparatory committee for the special session of the General Assembly in June of this year.

Mr. Chairman, scientists in virtually every field wish their analyses and extrapolations for the future to be accurate. However, as Director of the Population Division, I am hoping that our population projections for the future are wrong. This may sound strange, so let me explain.

Today the world's population is nearly 6 billion. According to our most recent projections, the 6 billion mark for the world's population will be reached in October of this year.

The first population projection for the year 2000 prepared by the Population Division was done some 40 years ago. At that time the Population Division projected a population for the year 2000 of slightly more than 6 billion, according to the medium variant. In the aftermath of the Second World War, when the world population was slightly above 2 billion, few believed that in less than 50 years the world population could reach 6 billion. Yet, the earliest projection of the United Nations Population Division for the year 2000 seems to be remarkably accurate.

A tripling of the world's population in a period of 50 years seemed impossible. However, there were a handful of international demographers who ventured to think otherwise. Addressing this Commission in 1946, the Director of the Population Division, Frank Notestein, prophetically reported the following:

"In regions which now support more than half of the world's two and a quarter billion people, population could double in thirty years if the improvements in health that existing knowledge makes possible were promptly realized. A general improvement in health is not only desirable but possible, and should be greatly assisted by the work of the United Nations in the political, economic and social fields. Such improvements, however, would generate a period of population growth, the like of which the human race has never before experienced. "

Fifty years from now, the United Nations Population Division projects a much larger world population than exists today. We are anticipating a world close to 9 billion inhabitants, according to our medium variant. I hope we are wrong. I hope that this projection for the world's population turns out to be far too high.

Mr. Chairman, today, the world's population is growing by 78 million people per year. India has the largest share of this growth at 21 per cent, or about 16 million people. India is followed by China, with a 15 per cent contribution, or 11 million people. The top five countries, India, China, Pakistan, Indonesia, and Nigeria, account for nearly 50 per cent of the annual growth of the world's population.

In the coming 50 years, the projected increase of 3 billion people will be taking place in the currently less developed regions. In fact, the population of the more developed regions is projected to remain essentially unchanged at 1.2 billion over the next 50 years. In contrast, the populations of the less developed regions are expected to grow from 4.8 billion today to 7.8 billion by 2050.

India alone will grow by 50 per cent over the next five decades, according to our medium variant, i.e., from 1 billion to 1.53 billion. In 2050, India will be the largest country in the world. Even more rapidly, however, Nigeria and Pakistan will both grow by roughly 120 per cent in the next half century, i.e., from 156 million to 345 million for Pakistan and from 112 million to 244 million for Nigeria.

Now, I would like to turn to the subject of fertility. Fifty years ago, couples in developing countries were having an average of six children. Today, the average is slightly less than three. Again, few in the 1950s were bold enough to declare that fertility would drop so rapidly. For example, in 1950 China's fertility rate was among the highest in the world, approximately 6.2 children per couple. Now the fertility of China is well below replacement, at 1.8 children per couple. Was there anyone in 1950 that could have foreseen this rapid decline in Chinese fertility?

Other examples of rapid fertility declines include: Viet Nam, its fertility rate of 6.1 children is now 2.3; Brazil's fertility has declined from 6.2 to 2.2; and Kenya's high of eight children per couple in the 1960s is approaching 4 children per couple today. What should we assume for the future? For example, will Pakistan's fertility of around 5 children per couple drop to replacement levels of about two children per couple in the coming decades?

In the more developed regions, the fertility transition has gone from an average of approximately 3 children per couple in the early 1950s to 1.5 children per couple today, well below replacement levels. The challenge for the developed countries, and some developing countries, is properly addressing the consequences of below replacement fertility. Will fertility of these countries recover or stay below replacement? Our projections assume that they will remain below replacement levels for some time.

Accordingly, between now and 2050, the populations of 30 countries are projected to decline. Germany's population, for example, is projected to decrease from 82 million to 73 million; Japan's population is projected to decrease from 126 million to 105 million; and Russia's population is projected to decline 147 million to 121 million. Very low fertility levels lead not only to population decline, but also to rapid population ageing. These changes in size and structure have significant social, economic and political consequences for these countries and regions. And these consequences need to be addressed today, not tomorrow.

For more than a decade now, the Population Division has also examined the demographic impact of HIV/AIDS. Our recent 1998 set of projections shows a devastating toll from the AIDS epidemic with respect to mortality and population loss. In the 29 hardest hit African countries, life expectancy at birth is currently estimated at 47 years, seven years less than what could be expected in the absence of AIDS. Estimates of the prevalence of HIV are high. In some countries, as much as one fourth of the adult population is HIV positive.

In addition, we project that by 2015 the combined population of these 29 African countries will be approximately 60 million less than they would have been in the absence of AIDS. Again, I hope our projections of the number of AIDS deaths are wrong and that we have overestimated the likely impact of AIDS.

Considerable uncertainty exists regarding the pattern of the epidemic in China and India. At the end of 1997, it is estimated the numbers of HIV positive cases were approximately 400 thousand in China and 4 million in India. Should we expect the epidemic in India and China to follow the terrible path of the 29 hardest hit African countries? Again, I hope the spread of the AIDS epidemic in China and India will not be permitted to follow the pattern observed in southern Africa.

For the world as a whole, we expect average life expectancy at birth to increase by about ten years over the next half century, that is from 66 years currently to 76 years by the year 2050. Again I hope this projection is wrong; I hope it turns out that we have been too conservative.

Perhaps, we should anticipate a higher average life expectancy at birth, say 100 years.

Some years ago the distinguished delegate from France, Professor Jean Bourgeois-Pichat, urged this Commission, with his characteristic Gallic flair and imagination, to consider human longevity reaching as high as 120 or even 150 years. As I recall, he imagined that future advances in technology, the health and medical sciences, and bio-engineering would extend life expectancy at birth to nearly double its current level. I wish our projections could be so bold. We assume 10 years of improvement in life expectancy at birth over the next 50. I hope we are wrong; perhaps with new technologies, medical discoveries, healthy life styles and advances in bio-engineering, we may see average life expectancy approaching the vision of Bourgeois-Pichat in the next century.

An example of what can be achieved in a relatively short period of time is reflected in an experience I had some weeks ago at a high school sponsored Model United Nations. During my presentation when I was describing recent improvements in health and mortality, I mentioned the name of Dr. Jonas Salk, and the importance of his contribution. After my talk, one of the younger students came up to me and asked: "Who was Jonas Salk?". I replied that Jonas Salk discovered the vaccine for polio. The student then asked me: "What is polio?"

Mr. Chairman, with sufficient progress, perhaps in the not too distant future, young students will ask us: "What is AIDS?" "What is malaria?" "What is tuberculosis?" Or "What is Parkinson's or Alzheimer's disease?"

As I said at the outset of my statement, while scientists generally strive for accuracy in their extrapolations, I hope our populations projections are wrong. I hope that the population of world in 50 years will be well below 9 billion; I hope that our projections of HIV infections and the number of AIDS deaths turn out to be absurdly too high; and I hope that our projections of average life expectancy at birth will be viewed as much too low.

In the year 2050, I would like to be able to look back at our current projections and say to this Commission: "Our projections were wrong; things turned out much better than my colleagues and I had projected."

Mr. Chairman, this Commission has a vital role to play as it is the ground breaking first tier for the follow-up to the ICPD Programme of Action. Leadership from this Commission can contribute to the United Nations system's ability to making the world in 2050 a much better place.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.