

Statement to the Second Committee
by Mr. Nitin Desai
Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs
Introducing Item 98: Environment and Sustainable Development
New York, 29 October 2001

Thank you very much Mr. Chairman,

Mr. Chairman,

It is a pleasure for me to be here with the Second Committee to introduce this very important item 98 on Environment and Sustainable Development. As you know, this is the item under which the Committee will address the preparations for the World Summit on Sustainable Development along with a range of other issues. Before I speak on the World Summit, let me draw your attention to the various reports that are before you.

The first item that you have is the International Year of Freshwater 2003. The Report of the Secretary-General addresses the state of preparations for this year which, as you know, was an initiative launched by the Government of Tajikistan and was co-sponsored by about 148 countries. This is something that will, of course, be of major interest and importance in the context of the Johannesburg Summit, also a major focus is the publication of the World Water Development Report which is expected to be launched at the Third World Water Forum in Kyoto in March 2003.

The second item that I wish to draw your attention to is the Promotion of new and renewable sources of energy, including the implementation of the World Solar Programme 1996-2005. The Secretary-General's report on this subject focuses on the actions that are being taken for the implementation of this programme. Once again, it is likely that your discussions will be a major contribution to the preparations for the Johannesburg Summit.

The third item before you is the Secretary-General's Report on the Barbados Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States. This too is something which is important in its own right and also as contribution for the preparations for the Johannesburg Summit.

Mr. Chairman,

Let me now turn to the preparations for the World Summit on Sustainable Development. You have before you the report of the first PrepCom, which was essentially an organizational session, and the report prepared on the progress in the preparation for the Johannesburg Summit. In many ways we look to this session of the

Second Committee as the launching pad for the global process on the preparations for the Johannesburg Summit.

Let me say a word first on the process so far. The major activity in the period since May, when the first Organizational Session of the PrepCom met, has been at the regional level in the form of Regional Roundtables, as well as intergovernmental meetings at the regional level. Four of these intergovernmental meetings have been held: two of them, in fact, just last week, and the final fifth one will be held for the ESCAP region towards the end of November in Cambodia. All of these meetings are basically seeking to make an assessment of the progress in the implementation of Agenda 21 at the regional level and contribute towards the global preparatory process, whose first substantive PrepCom will meet in January 2002.

Besides this, there has been a very rich preparatory process among the stakeholders. The stakeholders have participated very enthusiastically in the Commission on Sustainable Development, which has, as you know, the dialogue segment, and they have really mobilized themselves to prepare for the Summit. This is true for the business community, for local authorities, for trade unions, for activist groups, for farmers associations, as well as groups like women, youth, indigenous people, scientists and others. I would commend your attention to many of the products that are coming out of this stakeholder process.

Mr. Chairman,

I really want to focus a little now on questions of substance. One of the problems with the bottom-up preparatory process has been that it is still not entirely clear at the global level what is the agenda of this summit beyond the fairly general proposition that it will review the implementation of Agenda 21 and the other Rio outcomes and identify measures for strengthening implementation. That's a fairly general statement and I think one of our challenges is to crystallize this broad objective in terms of fairly concrete ideas which can be pursued in the run-up to Johannesburg and for which we would secure appropriate commitments in Johannesburg.

I believe the time has come for us to focus attention on this, and I see this two-day session of this Second Committee as in some ways the launch of the global dimension of the preparatory process. We have had a rich regional process and we have had stakeholder process. Ideas are emerging, but the time has come to start bringing all of these things together. The timing and responsibility for this, of course, rests with the preparatory process which will start in January. But the Second Committee's debate here can make a very valuable contribution in the crystallization of this agenda. What we are looking for is essentially your early views. It is for this reason that we have asked some of the people that are involved in the regional preparatory process, in the regional roundtables, eminent people who are involved with the regional roundtables, to come to New York. They will be constituting a Panel this afternoon at 4:30, and present to you what has emerged from their processes. I hope this will help to give you a sense of the issues that have come up in the regional process.

Let me just focus a bit on what I think are the matters that we have to look at in the assessment. The Rio Summit focussed on sustainable development. It was an attempt to combine environment and development. In essence, when we talk of sustainable development, we are talking about two things: on the one hand, of meeting needs; on the other hand, of protecting the future ability to meet needs. The first requires us to show results in terms of the human condition, here and now. The second requires us to show results in terms of the actions taken to protect the resource base on which the human condition depends -- essentially, different dimensions of the protection of natural resources and the environment.

These are the two dimensions: meeting needs and protecting the natural resource and environmental dimension on which our capacity to meet the social and economic developmental needs rests. What can we say in terms of these two parameters of sustainable development? Surely the record of the past decade will be a matter of some disappointment. One can hardly say that over the past decade we have made dramatic progress in reducing poverty or in reducing under nourishment. We certainly have made some progress in some areas of health, but other problems have surfaced, such as HIV/AIDS. Surely our assessment is bound to show that we have not made as much progress as we would have liked when it comes to the first dimension of sustainable development. And, equally if it comes to the protection of environment, practically every measure that we look at suggests that we have not really, as yet, made significant progress. There are a few plus points here, but in the aggregate, we have not made nearly as much progress as we would have liked.

Let me give you a simple measure of the latter: the World-wide Fund for Nature has produced something that they describe as a Living Planet Report 2000. There is a very interesting calculation here. The calculation that they make asks: "How much land would be required to sustain the consumption that we see today in the world?" They don't cover every area; they basically focus on renewable resources. What is the amount of crop land required, the amount of grazing land required, the amount of forest area required, the amount of fishing ground required? It takes into account how much land you would require to absorb the CO₂ that we emit. In a sense, there are the biological demands which we as humans make on the planet. The report compares this with what is actually available. The conclusion is that the total impact, the total requirement to sustain what we consume today is of the order, in equivalent units, of 2.85 area units per person on Earth. What is actually available is 2.18, an ecological deficit of close to 30 per cent. That is, as of today, we as a human race are making demands on the natural ecosystem which is 30 per cent higher than what that system has.

And, there are of course differences between countries, between rich and poor people. They make calculations for different groups of countries. But the calculations given are not in terms of UN categories but in terms of OECD and non-OECD. In the case of non-OECD there is a rough balance between the demands that human population makes on the natural ecosystem and what is available. In the case of OECD countries,

there is a huge deficit; the total demand is in the order of a little over 7 area units while what is available is of the order of 3.4 area units.

I give you this figure in order to say that if you look at the trends there is no indication that there is any improvement. That is why we have to recognize that we have a major issue ahead of us in the Johannesburg Summit. How are we going to tackle this? We cannot read this simply as an environmental issue because essentially the problem lies in the way in which development proceeds. I put it to you that we basically have to think of what we need to do in terms of three broad fields.

First, sustainable livelihoods and eradication of poverty. The social dimension, or meeting needs, is a central element in the concept of sustainable development and deserves attention in its own right. Because a world which is ecologically sound but in which large numbers of people have to live in poverty is not sustainable. So attacking poverty is something which is relevant to sustainable development in its own right. And there is a certain amount of political energy in this area. In the Millennium Summit, our Presidents and Prime Ministers have committed themselves to an ambitious course of halving absolute poverty by 2015 and a string of other goals which relate to other dimensions of poverty. That is certainly something which we will have to reinforce in Johannesburg.

But there is something more than that; 70 to 75 per cent of the world's poor live in the rural areas of the Third World. Their poverty cannot be alleviated simply through target-oriented anti-poverty programmes. It requires us to address the land, the water, and the biotic resources on which their livelihood depends. How are we going to halve absolute poverty unless we also reduce drastically the amount of degraded land, unless we reduce the impact of water scarcity? In what way can the 70 to 75 per cent of the poor who live in the rural areas of the Third World come out of poverty without our addressing the quality of the resource base on which they depend? This connection between poverty and natural resources environment is something that we will have to strengthen in Johannesburg. What we require is not just coordination between anti-poverty programmes and area programmes; we will have to look for integration of programmes in which every area programme includes an anti-poverty component and every anti-poverty programme in rural areas of the Third World includes an area management component. It is more than just simply reinforcing a commitment to the Millennium goals; we have to design programmes which truly reflect the real nature of poverty and its connection with environment and natural resources.

Take also the case of the health and environment connection. We have said that we are going to reduce infant mortality by three quarters by 2015. Much can be done by delivering individual therapeutic services through immunization and nutrition support. But, consider the number of children who died because of diarrhoeal diseases related to water and sanitation. Consider the number of children who suffer from respiratory illnesses because of air quality in many of our cities. Surely, if we are serious about the infant mortality goal, we will have to address the environmental dimension of health --

the habitat dimension of health. That is yet another example of why we need to connect agendas.

Natural disasters is another example. Look at the suffering which arises when people are suddenly thrown into poverty by a natural disaster. That surely is something which requires an attention to resource use, specifically land and water management. The figure that I gave you earlier reflects the great difference of the impact on the natural ecosystem between OECD and non-OECD countries. If one would look at figures for individuals, it would probably be between rich and poor people also. We have to think in a longer-term basis of sustainable consumption and production. There is no way in which we can continue accumulating this ecological deficit. Sooner or later the stocks that we have inherited of ecological capital from the past will be exhausted. The time to act is now.

And, there are many areas that we need to address here. For instance, the discussions that we have had on energy in the Commission on Sustainable Development, focussed on both the dimension of meeting energy needs as they arise in developing countries in a sustainable way, and on the consequences of high levels of energy consumption in the richer countries. Both of these need to be tackled, so when we speak of sustainable consumption and production, it's not simply a matter of restraining consumption in order to protect the environment - this is also addressing issues of what sustainability means in terms of appropriate and immediate increases in consumption in poor houses and in poor countries – for energy, for paper products, for other resource intensive commodities. This cannot be done unless you also address the other dimension of how can we contain the pressures that arise from high consumption of these resources. There are areas like energy, tourism, industry, which will have to be looked at in this way.

But, both of these need a third element. All development, good or bad, involves human interventions in natural ecosystems. We interfere with hydrological systems, with material flows in nature. This is inevitable. In fact, the history of civilization is in some ways the impact of humans on nature.

We have reached the point, as I was trying to illustrate with the calculation by the World Wild Life Fund, at which the scale of our impacts, and increasingly the depth of our impact on these systems, is such that we can no longer take piece-meal decisions on development. When we look particularly at natural resources and the use of natural resources for development, we will have to bring in what I would describe as an ecosystem approach. Such an approach looks at developmental projects and programmes not only in terms of the developmental impact, but also in terms of their sustainability in the context of natural ecosystems. Issues relating to water, to oceans, to forests, biodiversity have to have this ecosystem approach superimposed on the developmental focus on meeting needs, on the strategic focus on balancing needs against availability. This is a third major dimension that we will have to look at.

In all of this, we have to aim at specific initiatives, specific programmes, specific commitments. And, if we are to do this, we will have to address the issue of the means of implementation, which has been a major area of concern. We will have to address issues about availability of finance for sustainable development, the changes that have arisen because of the growing impact of globalization. This is an important area of concern and some of these issues will be looked at in the finance for development process, but there are surely some issues which will have to be addressed in the context of Johannesburg also. Whatever we say are the programmatic initiatives on the substantive side will lack credibility unless there is also a sense of forward movement in this issue of finance for sustainable development.

On technology development and transfer, have we really seen enough effort being put into global cooperation technology transfer in key areas of technology which are relevant for sustainable development? I don't think so. There was a time when food security was an issue and we put together a great system of international agricultural research and global cooperation for agricultural research. Where is that system for sustainable development? Much of what we will say on programmatic initiatives relating to poverty, to health and environment, to energy, to industry, to management of ecosystems, will lack credibility unless they are backed up by effective measures for technological transformation in all countries.

There are other issues that we have to deal with: raising awareness, education, science. And what of the institutional dimension, the most difficult one? Because the key to what we are trying to do in sustainable development is to bring together people who otherwise are separated by boundaries of ministries, organizations, disciplines, etc. This is one of the most difficult things that we have to do. This institutional dimension at the global level, at the national level, at the community level, will also have to be addressed.

These are all great challenges and to address them, we require what I call the three "p's".

First is political will. We must recognize that what we are talking of is issues which are absolutely essential to our work on development at the global level. One of the areas of disappointment for many of us was that during the Millennium, though a third of the Secretary-General's report dealt with issues dealing with environment, there was virtually no reference to this dimension in the subsequent discussions. We have to change that. The Secretary-General recognizes this, which is why a few days ago he took certain steps to raise the profile of the preparations for this process, including for instance, appointing me as Secretary-General of the Johannesburg Summit. He has also appointed an advisory panel which is meeting now. In addition, he has requested Mr. Jan Pronk to go around to countries basically to build up support and commitment at the country level for this Summit. But there is much more we need to do, and we have to recognize that in many ways the key is the mobilization of political will. We need to recognize the urgency of the problem and to address it in concrete terms.

That brings me to the second “p”: practical steps. We will lack credibility if after Johannesburg we do not come out with something that people recognize as truly practical steps to carry forward the sustainable development agenda that emerged out of Rio and events after Rio. These steps must take the form of real programmes and commitments built around certain themes, and we have a lot of work between now and Johannesburg to develop them and to secure the commitment to implement and to fund them.

The third “p” is partnership. The effectiveness of what we do on sustainable development will of course depend a great deal on what official institutions do at the national and at the global level. It will also depend on the commitment of the people who have the direct impact on the use of resources: businesses, trade unions, farmers associations, cooperatives, and a whole host of other groups. And, a great deal of what we can do by way of practical action can be through partnership. These are the three p’s that I would focus attention on besides the substantive: political will, practical steps and partnership.

This is a tall agenda in some ways, but it is a double agenda. We did it in Rio; there is no reason why we can’t do it in Johannesburg. And, in many ways, what we have to look for now is a wakeup call. A wakeup call which truly tells the world it’s now or never. Not a wakeup call like the alarm clock that I have at home – the first time it rings I can press the snooze alarm and go to sleep for 15 minutes, the second time it rings again I can press the snooze alarm and go to sleep, this time for only five minutes. But, the third time it rings and I press the snooze alarm it doesn’t go off and I have no option but to get up and get going and come here to my work. Stockholm was the first alarm; Rio was the second alarm, and now what you are coming to is Johannesburg, the third alarm where you don’t have the option of pressing that snooze button. We have to get up and get going and our aim, therefore, in Johannesburg, is awareness and action. What you are going to do here over the next two days is the launch of that process.

I thank you very much and I look forward to working with you for this great Summit.