

June 7, 2003 – Plenary VIII

**Presenter: HE Ambassador Jan Mårtensson
Former Deputy Secretary General of the U.N.**

Your All Holiness, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, friends of the environment.

Your long journey has come to an end at a very appropriate place, and at a very appropriate date. I am referring to Stockholm and to the recent World Environment Day. The reason why is to me rather obvious. Your cruise in the Baltic has focused on environmental issues under the heading A Common Heritage: A Shared Responsibility, and it was actually in Stockholm that it all began, in this very week in June 1972, and I am referring to United Nations conference on the human environment which was the starting point for our endeavors in this field, vital for our very survival. The organizers of your symposium have asked me to share some views with you on the U.N. conference in my capacity as Secretary-General of the Swedish National Committee for that event.

Let me begin by correcting myself. I said it all started during some sunny summer weeks thirty-one years ago. This is, however, not entirely correct. It had begun already in 1968, when Sweden proposed that the United Nations convene an international conference on problems relating to the human environment. This proposal was unanimously accepted by the general assembly, and in 1969 the Swedish government invited the U.N. to hold the conference in Stockholm in June 1972. Maurice Strong of Canada whom you know of course was subsequently appointed Secretary-General on the U.N. side.

On a historic perspective, it is worth recalling that at the time of the Swedish initiative, the problems relating to the environment virtually did not exist, as it were, but in the mind of a few experts. Rachel Carson, for one, broke ice with her book *Silent Spring*, but the majority of the general public, including most politicians, did not grasp neither the existence nor the magnitude of the bulging problem or the inherent dangerous consequences. The issue had not yet been faced, and to many, big smokestacks over high factory chimneys as well as forming exhaust in rivers and lakes, were not signs of dangerous pollution, but tokens of industrial development and wealth. We did not realize that natural resources were in most cases not renewable, and to economists, water and air were still free utilities.

The aim of the conference was summarized in the General Assembly resolution in 1969 in the following way, 'It should be the main purpose of the conference to serve as the practical means to encourage and to provide guidelines for action by governments and international organizations designed to protect and improve the human environment and to remedy and prevent its impairment by means of international cooperation, bearing in mind the particular importance of enabling developing countries to forestall concurrence of such problems.'

In his inaugural address at the opening session on June 5, 1972, the Swedish Prime Minister Olaf Palma recalled the background of the Swedish initiative. And I will quote Mr. Palmer: 'It was to focus the attention of all peoples on one of the vital questions facing mankind, with the view to bringing about well-informed discussions; and, what is more important, concrete action. The earth's resources are limited and

our environment is vulnerable to forces set in motion by technical and economic development. The amount of air and water are restricted, and so are sources of energy. Supplies of raw material are exhaustible. Uncontrolled pollution of the seas and the atmosphere might permanently upset the process on which human life depends. The pressure on our limited resources, accentuated by population growth, and on food production cannot feed the growing number of the world's inhabitants. What is ultimately at stake is the survival of mankind on our limited planet. Consequently, environmental issues are the urgent concerns of all peoples of the world. They demonstrate in a dramatic way the need for international cooperation and an international legal system.'

The President of the conference, Mr. Ingmar Benson, Minister of Agriculture and later Speaker of the Swedish Parliament, also focused on the central themes in his opening statement. 'We ignored the human environment aspects when we initiated our process of industrialization. That was a mistake and the reason why we are facing the problems before us today. Our experience has led us to realize the necessity of harmoniously integrating policies for the protection and improvement of the human environment in the planning for economic and social development. We have to establish a new thinking when it comes to the environmental values.' He also underlined the need of giving particular attention to the problems of the developing countries. One very desirable object of the conference, he said, is to enable developing countries to avoid the costly mistakes made in the industrialized countries.

Well, ladies and gentleman, I believe that these statements are as valid today as they were three decades ago and they concretized in a nutshell what the conference was all about, a new thinking, a new thinking. Or, as another speaker put it, 'it is indeed a historic conference. Possibly future generations will call it a turning point, a moment in history when a major correction was introduced in the process of the industrial revolution.'

I imagine that June 5, 1972 was not actually the start of the process. The conference was indeed a peak and conclusion of many years of preparation and work all over the world. Thus, each member state was obliged to submit a national report on the environmental conditions within its boundaries, forcing it to thoroughly examine all aspects of this new, as it were, issue. And the conference in Stockholm dealt with paradoxically, the world's oldest and also newest problems. Oldest in the sense that they emerged by the time of the first human settlements and then accompanied mankind like a silent, growing shadow through centuries: deforestation, salination, decertification and pollution followed in the trace of man. With the industrial revolution, the manmade negative impact on our environment accelerated with new procedures, new techniques and methods as well as with new materials and substances, DDT and PCB to mention but a few. Ironically, as you know, the inventor of DDT received a Nobel Prize. That shows the level of our ignorance at the time. The environmental concerns also belong to our new problem areas, as they only recently emerged on the agenda of mankind, awakened and highlighted by the Stockholm process.

But Stockholm was only the beginning. Our knowledge of the complexity of the situation and its potentially negative consequences was limited, or as someone put it, 'an island of knowledge in an ocean of ignorance.'

In the limited time, we are not allowed to go into the details of this very complex and politically sensitive conference in Stockholm back in 1972. The participation or the non-participation of the then East Germany is only one example amongst many, as well as the presence of the delegation of South Vietnam and the

American Secretary of Defence Robert MacNamara during the peak of anti-war discussions and demonstrations worldwide. Let me just highlight a few issues, and start with the north-south dimension. Some developing countries were suspicious. They feared that the conference would only serve the interests of the industrialized countries, in using environmental concerns as cover for securing their economic supremacy to the detriment of the economic development in the Third World. Others felt that the conflict between environmental demands and economic growth were incompatible. Still others suggested that the conference would result in nothing but empty declarations and lofty statements that would raise towards the ceiling to burst like glittering soap bubbles when confronted with realities.

These sample thoughts, however, did not materialize, and Stockholm '72 was one of the not too many U.N. conferences that were successful and led to concrete and lasting results. A plan of action was adopted with some one hundred recommendations covering important areas from habitat to education and information. Water and air pollution was of course included, as well as natural resources, with a set of recommendations concerning each area: agriculture, forestry, genetic resources, water and energy. A declaration was also adopted with a number of central principles. It starts by stating man's fundamental right to freedom, equality and satisfying living conditions in an environment that secures a life in dignity and well-being. But man has also, it postulates, a responsibility to protecting and enhancing the environment for present and future generations.

To summarize, the programs were identified and put on the national map. Solutions were elaborated and suggested, and a direction of the compass towards the future was established. A new agency, as you know, within the U.N. system was created, the U.N. Environmental Program UNEP, and a new economic theory emerged: to growth has been added a new dimension. It has been realized that environment in a wide sense is a vital and unavoidable part of growth and development. The goals and means of society concerning distribution of resources are revised, and the costs for the environment are moved from the negative to the positive side of our balance sheet, thus no longer considered as burdening the economy, but rather as resources, investments in the future.

The conference was also the first occasion at which the issue of the environment was discussed in a comprehensive manner. And it was, not least important, the starting point, the springboard of worldwide international public opinion, which brought about pressure on politicians and decision makers worldwide.

In its context, Stockholm was also a major breakthrough as to non-governmental organization participation in U.N. meetings. Previously they had been closed out. But we realized the enormous importance of a well-informed and knowledgeable public opinion all over the world that could carry the torch and convey the message, not least the churches and religious institutions and congregations. Special facilities for the NGOs were thus created, including possibilities of participation at the conference itself, and an alternative conference was also arranged. These procedures established have since become common practice at the U.N. and proven to be very useful in channeling the legitimate concerns, interests and ideas of important segments of the world's constituency.

I think it is thus fair to state that Stockholm '72 made environmental concerns a top priority on the international agenda. It made the world aware of the situation and that constructive action was urgently needed. And the environmental concept grew and widened from basically focusing on the physical environment, like pollution, to encompass almost every walk of life. Today we realize that most of our activities

have an environmental dimension. Sustainable development is indeed the confirmation of this insight.

As you all know, the development in this field has accelerated. A number of conventions and declarations have been adopted, new laws have entered into force, institutions and agencies have been established, worldwide research is being carried out, the Brantland and Brant reports were important steps, the Rio conference in '92 which its Agenda 22, and others as well as the Johannesburg summit last year resulting in the global plan of action for sustainable development, to mention just a few important milestones. As the Speaker just mentioned, when it concerns the Baltic the Helsinki convention and the Baltic Strategy as well as Agenda 21 for the Baltic are other examples of important activities. Also, the business community is addressing the issues from an ethical and moral point of view, through *inter alia*, corporate responsible investing and socially responsible investing, leading to social ethic and environment related considerations in their decisions.

Time is too short indeed to dwell on the impressive and encouraging developments that have taken place since 1972, although much of course remains to be achieved. I have merely highlighted a few events in this field that indeed concern our common future in a world where the economic, social and environmental factors are of growing importance. A world in which governments, churches, academia, business, media and NGOs all have important roles to play together in order to diminish divides, as it were, to translate lofty ideals and concepts into practical realities worldwide, nationwide and locally.

In this context, it is very encouraging to note the activities carried out by Religion, Science and the Environment on the initiative taken by His All Holiness the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew in the past eight years. It would be superfluous before this audience to repeat what has been achieved. Suffice it to mention the four previous symposia focusing on the environmental situation in the Aegean Sea, the Black Sea, the Danube River, the Adriatic Sea and now the Baltic Sea. These symposia have served as a meeting place of minds, a focal point where distinguished representatives of important sectors of our society have come together to discuss various dimensions of the problems involved, believing that the convergence of scientific knowledge, faith and imagination could contribute to the creation of a strong environmental ethic. The Most Reverend Metropolitan John of Pergamon has summarized the aims of the symposia in a very succinct manner, 'to combine the wisdom of religion and the power of science.'

In concluding, looking at your impressive agenda, you have in a very constructive manner approached the intricate situation of the Baltic Sea, an extremely vulnerable environment exposed to various threats. Indeed, as was just mentioned, graphically illustrated only the other day by large oil spills in the southern Baltic. Church leaders, prominent politicians, experts, media and scientists have presented their views, and you have in depth analyzed problems and solutions. I am convinced that your endeavors will bear fruit and be translated into much required concrete action. I am also convinced that one of the important effects of these symposia is the network shaping your personal contacts during, after and in between scheduled sessions. The Baltic Symposium is thus not an end in itself, it is a part of a continuing process of creating awareness about the seas as a common heritage, a shared responsibility.

It is in this context also encouraging to note that this symposium is under the patronage also of Mr. Romano Prodi, President of the European Commission, and that one of the participants is the E.U. Commissioner for the environment, Ms. Margot

Wallström. It augers well for the continuing necessary international cooperation in this field, and I congratulate the organizers for the successful Baltic Sea Symposium.

Your journey across the Baltic has come to an end, but it is not the end of your journey. It will continue, and we all have the responsibility to work towards the improvement of our global inheritance, thus avoiding the fulfillment of Mark Twain's sinister prophecy when he once wrote, 'The history of mankind is a deplorable episode on one of the minor planets.' Thank you very much.