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Habitat:

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STATEMENT BY ENRIQUE PENALOSA, SECRETARY-GENERAL OF HABITAT:

UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE ON HUMAN SETTLEMENTS

Before the Plenary Meeting of the Conference
In Vancouver, Canada, 31 May 1976

We are here -- although it may seem paradoxical to say so -- at the end and the beginning of a long, arduous and complex task which the United Nations undertook immediately upon receiving the mandate of the General Assembly. This has been a process which only in a small way indicates the magnitude of what is expected of us the moment this Conference is closed.

We are meeting today in a modern site, endowed with all the facilities and equipment that technology and science can offer, in the heart of one of the most beautiful cities in the world. This is a splendid place to hold a conference which Canada -- with its generous hospitality and above all with its true understanding of the rapidly worsening social and political crisis of our time -- has placed at our disposition.

But we also are aware that this city, and the few others like it, are a world apart from that in which more than half the people of our planet struggle for their daily survival, a planet which is itself each day more limited and impoverished in the natural resources for action by those who inhabit it.

In this era we are crystallizing the physical forms which will shelter or imprison future generations. Experience forces us to recognize how much our present life is conditioned by the urban structures, comparatively so small, that we have inherited from previous generations. Those which we are building today, with enormous investment of resources and tremendous human effort, particularly in the poor countries, are nonetheless marked by numerous negative characteristics which will shape, whether or not we desire it to be so, the lives of the generations which come after us.

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Village, town, city and metropolis -- which is to say human settlements, small and large -- constitute the built environment of mankind. But the crisis which now confronts us is not only a question of housing, or inadequate transport systems, or urban pollution and congestion. It is a crisis of social organization and of civilization itself.

In this room are the representatives of () nations in whose care are the great majority of the world's peoples. I regret the absence here today of other countries, few in number, which might have had the opportunity to tell of their experiences and their problems. Nonetheless, I am sure that these countries will learn of what you accomplish and what you propose, and that their representatives will contribute to the understanding of these issues in many future meetings.

In two short weeks, of course, it is not possible to expect miracles. Nor are they expected. The success of the Conference will not be measured here in Vancouver, but in the policies, plans and programmes which are adopted in the years to come to better the lot of the masses of the people in each society through the conception and design of better systems of human settlements.

I listened with profound interest to the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Mr. Kurt Waldheim, who with great eloquence has placed this Conference in its proper historic perspective. As Secretary-General of Habitat, it remains to me to touch on some of the more important aspects of the Conference, indicating not only needs but concerns, which have been elaborated over the past years in direct consultation with Governments and with the specialized branches of the United Nations.

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One of the great accomplishments of recent years has been the awakening of our awareness of ecological problems. When mankind came to consider that the forces under its control and the processes it had unchained were so powerful as to threaten the very continuation of planetary life, an authentic cry of alarm was raised. This alarm was recognized at the Stockholm Conference, setting in motion a debate of vital importance and creating forms of action inspired by this new vision of world problems.

This Conference on human settlements carries forward the global vision of Stockholm, but looks more closely at existing reality in terms of human needs and thereby faces the imperative requirement not only to respect the earth but to remake it: to remodel the human environment with new ecological balances but above all with new and more just social balances.

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The answer to this challenge is political. But it is not only Governments which will bear the responsibility of facing it, because the solutions will not be found except through collective action. It will be, like all social and political endeavours, a task of Governments and peoples together.

It is for this reason that I am pleased by, and place the greatest importance in, the high political representation as well as the broad composition of your delegations, distinguished delegates. Fundamental changes in the organization and management of human settlements will demand, above all, political commitment and decisions.

I am also encouraged by the presence of so many representatives of non-governmental organizations and the world information media, because I believe the decisions that must be taken by Governments must be shared and supported by an informed and committed public opinion.

These political decisions must also be accompanied by the advice of experts and technicians, who in turn must adapt their experience and knowledge to the new goals and obligations which will result from the examination to which we are pledged. For this I welcome the number and caliber of experts taking part in the Conference.

Of foremost importance will be the recommendations which will be made here on the need to establish national human settlement policies and on the institutional arrangements through which these can be realized, for it is unlikely that most countries will be able to implement new policies on human settlements without carrying out institutional changes. The very fact of the crisis is evident proof of the failure of existing structures at all levels of government, within nations and within the international organizations.

Distinguished delegates, there are many issues with which human settlement policies may deal, but three of them have been raised again and again by your Governments which I would therefore like to mention on this occasion:

* The spiraling growth of population and the imbalances in development and living conditions between rural and urban areas, with the consequent problem of migration to the cities;

* The growing disparities in income and opportunity between different social classes, both by region and within individual communities; and

* The lack of adequate controls over the use of land and over urban sprawl.

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In the first case, we are faced with the fact that during the last quarter century nearly 300 million people in the developing world have abandoned their rural birthplaces and joined the migration to urban centres. Governments have tried to stem this human tide, and in most cases, it must be admitted, have failed because despite the dreadful conditions in urban slums and squatter settlements the migrant believes they are still better than what he has left behind and that the city is the last hope for a better life for himself or for his children. In most cases, moreover, the land is not being deserted. Despite the tremendous transfer of people to the cities of the third world, the rural population in absolute numbers, is still rising and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

Human settlement policies will have to seek a new balance between city and village, ending rural isolation and dispersion, for if there is no opportunity in the countryside, migration to the cities is a necessity and also a basic human right.

Frequently it is argued that the challenges of human settlements in the coming decades could be resolved through control of population growth. Without discounting the high priority among world concerns which must be given to stabilizing the population of the planet, it is also important to keep in mind that the people who will form families and thereby demand housing, services and jobs over the next 20 years are already born and are among us.

Regarding social justice and the sharing of national resources, most of the developing countries of the world are coming to terms with the hard truth that they cannot achieve a European or North American style of life for the majority of their peoples in the foreseeable future.

What has been created in the developing world are bifurcated societies in which a small minority enjoys an imported and exotic level of comfort and consumption while the masses of the people are deprived of their most basic needs. Nowhere is this duality more apparent and more pronounced than in the great urban centres. The governments of the world have met in recent weeks in Nairobi to consider the injustice in the disparity of wealth between nations. But no less injustice is found in the disparities which exist between social classes in the majority of national societies.

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Finally, the issue of land use is of great concern everywhere, especially as it relates to the responsibilities of government at local, regional and national levels to recapture and guide the forces of urban expansion. The questions which will be paramount are whether urban growth will continue by a spontaneous and in most cases chaotic process or will be planned to meet the future needs of the community, and whether urban land will continue to be treated as a commodity of the market place and as an instrument of financial speculation or whether it will be brought under community control and planning.

How these questions will be answered will be among the deciding factors in shaping the human environment or most nations of the planet and it will be the most urgent task of this generation and the one to follow.

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I have not attempted to review all the issues which are for your consideration, but only to synthesize some of the main concerns and questions which have emerged during the preparatory process. In this process we have benefitted greatly from the guidance and assistance of your governments. We have also enjoyed the help of many branches of the United Nations and of the great number of non-governmental organizations and private citizens who have generously dedicated their time, knowledge and experience.

We are especially grateful for the contributions of the Canadian government and wish to praise the work of Mr. James MacNeill, the commissioner-general of the host secretariat; we wish to express our gratitude to all those who worked so devotedly through the many sessions of the Preparatory Committee, and especially to its chairman, Father George Muhoho; and it is our duty to note the extraordinary contribution of the United Nations Environment Programme and its executive director, Mr. Mostapha Tolba, and the great work of Mr. Maurice Strong, Secretary-General of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment and first executive director of UNEP, whose creative energy has sparked the awareness which the world now gives to the issues under your consideration.

I also wish today to pay a very special homage of admiration and gratitude to two persons outside the international system who as a consequence of their personal convictions have dedicated so much effort to awakening the world and its leaders to the threat facing the man-made environment. They are Barbara Ward, the distinguished British economist and writer, and the recently deceased Constantino Doxiades, who with justice can be named the father of the new science of human settlements.

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Distinguished delegates, there are those who believe that the world is tired of crises and that the international organisations already are stretched too thin to take on new responsibilities. But the issues that are before you are of such magnitude that they cannot be relegated to a second priority. They cannot be put aside simply because the world is tired of problems or because their urgency happens to come later in time than other world concerns.

The problems of human settlements can never be totally resolved, neither in this or in succeeding generations. The work will go on in search of solutions, adapting changes in population growth and distribution to new technological possibilities and the evolving demands, needs and aspirations of society.

These challenges must be faced in the next decades, and we are here to begin to find answers to them. This is the task which has been entrusted to us. Difficult and complex, of course, but it constitutes, as the Member States of the United Nations can testify, an unavoidable instrument in the search for peace.

Thank you.

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