

Statement by His Excellency Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad of Malaysia at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development

Rio de Janeiro, 13 June 1992

Mr Chairman,

I would like to thank our host, President Fernando Collor de Mello, and the Government of Brazil for the hospitality extended to us at this conference.

2. Malaysia has come to this conference because we are concerned about the environment. We are here to seek ways to achieve sustainable development and to establish a solid foundation for worldwide cooperation on environment and development. We appreciate that if anything is to be done towards sustainable development then all countries everywhere must work together. The boundaries of nations do not limit the pollution caused by them. Neighbours, both far and near, are affected by the pollutants produced by any nation.

3. Presently, Malaysia is well able to cope with its own pollution. In a country about the size of Britain, we have a population only one third as big. We are a developing country with a per capita income one-tenth of the developed countries. Our capacity for wasteful consumption is therefore very limited — roughly one thirtieth that of the developed countries.

4. On the other hand, our capacity to deal with our own waste is far in excess of our needs. Our land is almost 60 percent covered with self-regenerating tropical rain forest, with an additional 15 percent covered by tree plantations. Any carbon dioxide we produce we can absorb.

5. If pollution can be contained within the boundaries of a country, then Malaysia has nothing to worry. But Malaysia has to deal with cross-border pollution. Most developed countries have already destroyed their capacity to deal with their own waste. Not only have they clear-felled their forests but their production of waste is so great that they must rely on the poor countries to dispose of this waste.

6. Malaysia is prepared to do its bit. But can nothing be done to reduce the waste? Is it right that the poor be forced to clean up the mess created by the rich? Should there not be some sharing of the task, the responsibility and the cost for cleaning up? These are the questions we would like answered at this conference.

7. For the right answers there must be a modicum of sincerity and honesty on the part of everyone. We talk a lot now about a new world order, human rights, democracy and justice. Let there be evidence of all these when we try to identify the causes and to resolve the problems of sustainable development.

8. We recognise that man in his pursuit of development is the cause of the pollution and degradation of the environment. We cannot stop development altogether but we can at least minimise the pollution caused by it.

9. If we are to achieve sustainable development then we must all be prepared to make the necessary adjustments. But if we begin by saying that our life-style is sacred and not for negotiation then it would be meaningless to talk of development and the environment.

10. It is claimed that one of the causes of environmental degradation is the size of the population of some developing countries. We dispute this assumption.

11. However we note that rich developed communities tend to have low birth rates. If we want to reduce population growth then we must help poor communities to become developed. Yet we hear from the rich, proposals which would result in stopping the development of poor countries in order to reduce pollution. You may be able to reduce pollution but you will end up with massive overpopulation in the poorest developing countries.

12. We know that the 25 percent of the world population who are rich consume 85 percent of its wealth and produce 90 percent of its waste. Mathematically speaking, if the rich reduce their wasteful consumption by 25 percent, worldwide pollution will be reduced by 22.5 percent. But if the poor 75 percent reduce consumption totally and disappear from this earth altogether the reduction in pollution will only be by 10 percent.

13. It is what the rich do that counts, not what the poor do, however much they do it. That is why it is imperative that the rich change their life-styles. A change in the lifestyle of the poor only, apart from being unfair, is quite unproductive environment-wise. But the rich talk of the sovereignty of the consumers and their right to their life-styles. The rich will not accept a progressive and meaningful cutback in their emission of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases because it will be a cost to them and retard their progress. Yet they expect the poor peoples of the developing countries to stifle even their minute growth as if it will cost them nothing.

Excellencies,

14. One of the major issues we are expected to resolve is Global Warming. Here one of the major industrialized countries could not agree to cut-back on its emission of carbon dioxide at the rate generally accepted by others. Since it is the major source of industrial pollution its decision has rendered the agreement inequitable and meaningless.

15. Malaysia has for several years been cutting back on the emission of carbon dioxide. We impose a tax of 300 percent on cars with large capacity engines. Even small cars are heavily taxed. But in most developed countries the tax on automobiles and petrol is minimal thus accounting for the high car/population ratio. Surely a reduction in the number of private cars and better public transport would not change the life-style too much. Yet it will do wonders for Global Warming.

16. The other issue before us is bio-diversity. The poor countries have been told to preserve their forests and other genetic resources on the off-chance that at some future date something is discovered which might prove useful to humanity. This is the same as telling these poor countries that they must continue to be poor because their forests and other resources are more precious than themselves. Still they are not rejecting the value of bio-diversity, at least not totally.

17. Denying them their own resources will impoverish them and retard their development. Surely if something is discovered in their forests, they should be entitled to some returns.

18. But now we are told that the rich will not agree to compensate the poor for their sacrifices. The rich argue that the diversity of genes stored and safeguarded by the poor are of no value until the rich, through their superior intelligence, release the potential within. It is an intellectual property and must be copy-righted and protected.

19. Developing countries which met in Kuala Lumpur in April have agreed on a plan to reafforest the whole world. A Fund for this Greening of the World was proposed. But the North are resisting this proposal. Perhaps it is considered to be yet another attempt by the developing countries to squeeze the

rich using the environmental issue. The rich North can only see the chiselling ways of the South and is determined that they will not be squeezed. Yet the North demands a forest convention.

20. Obviously the North wants to have a direct say in the management of forests in the poor South at next to no cost to themselves. The pittance they offer is much less than the loss of earnings by the poor countries and yet it is made out as a generous concession.

21. We will accept the Global Environment Facility, and we will accept that it be administered by the OECD dominated World Bank. But can we not have a little say; can we not have more transparency in the administration of this Fund? Surely, this does not amount to the South squeezing the North.

22. The poor is not asking for charity. When the rich chopped down their own forests, built their poison-belching factories and scoured the world for cheap resources, the poor said nothing. Indeed they paid for the development of the rich. Now the rich claim a right to regulate the development of the poor countries. And yet any suggestion that the rich compensate the poor adequately is regarded as outrageous. As colonies we were exploited. Now as independent nations we are to be equally exploited.

Excellencies,

23. Malaysia was disillusioned about these inequities long before we reached Rio. In a world that has been won for democracy, we find powerful nations laying down terms even for participating in a democratic process. We find scant regard for the principles of fairness and equity. We find that even the Rio Declaration and Agenda 21 have been watered down upon insistence from the powerful and the rich.

24. Notwithstanding all these, we still have high expectations of this conference and we consider this Conference on the Environment and Development a success if there emerged a better understanding of the enormity of the problems we face and the need for us to cooperate on an equitable basis. Malaysia will do what can reasonably be expected of it for the environment.

SOURCE: Prime Minister's Office, Malaysia.