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Breaking the Silence of RIO

Shridath Ramphal

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By Shridath Ramphal

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Breaking the Silences of RIO

Shridath Ramphal

What a great joy it is to be in Pakistan at last. There is clearly much wisdom in the old saying that some of the best things in the life should be saved for later on. As it is, I come to Pakistan at a time when the Prime Minister with whom I worked most closely in context of Pakistan's return to the Commonwealth is again in office; when great gains have been made for democracy and the rule of law, and when Pakistan is poised to play a role of special significance in the affairs of our world community. And I come in a context in which that leadership is being given, namely, in the cause of development and environment. As President of the World Conservation Union, as a person of the Third World, as a close friend of this country, I am gratified that I come under the joint auspices of IUCN Pakistan and the Sustainable Development Policy Institute.

It is a particular honour to inaugurate the Sustainable Development Lecture Series which I hope will go on over the years to provide a platform for ideas on issues of development and environment - which I fear are going to be with us into a long and uncertain future. I hope the Series will become
established as one in which the interests and concerns of humanity as a whole can be aired, but one in which the particular vulnerabilities of the poor within humanity, whether at the level of countries or of people within countries, can be articulated. It is in the political domain that action for sustainability must be taken. But it is in the intellectual domain that the strategies of sustainability must be developed. Before change must come enlightenment; without enlightenment, we are not likely to change course. I congratulate those who have conceived of this Series and, as the first to deliver the Sustainable Development Lecture of Pakistan, I am humbled by the need to make a worthy beginning.

I have called this Lecture Breaking the Silences of Rio. That may seem strange, since the one thing that did not characterise Rio was silence. Indeed, it was accused of the very opposite - too much talking. That is a fair criticism in the context of too little action. Nevertheless, there were some matters about which we did not talk enough at Rio: some promises we did not make. It is about those in particular that I shall speak in this Inaugural Lecture - in the belief that we can aspire to sustainable development world-wide only if we break those silences and resolve to act not only on, but beyond, Agenda 21.

In the early years of this century the most illustrious Urdu poet of the subcontinent, Muhammad Iqbal, wrote of his changing world:

> *"The times have changed; the world has changed its mind."*

As we approach the 21st century, the times have changed again; but Iqbal (I suspect) might have questioned now whether the world has changed its mind. Even so, a year and a half after the Earth Summit, I assume we can start with some agreement, namely,

- that, over the aeons of time, our human species has been unwittingly, unevenly, but with quickening intensity unravelling the fabric of Earth's surface, its biosphere, and its enveloping atmosphere;
- that, in the process, we have not only imperilled existence everywhere but committed generations just born and to come to an increasingly problematic and uncertain future;
- that our generation, as custodians of the present and trustees of the future, must take responsibility for our acts and for their impact on Earth;
- that, with awareness of our human species as a part of nature, not apart from it, we must abandon arrogance and adopt humility, living in harmony, not contention with nature.

There is a Japanese verse by the poet Tomei which I have always found particularly sobering:

> *Insects too*
> *Think that this world*
> *Is their alone*.

If we do not change course, we may yet prove the insects right.

Some factors, however, are unchanging. We have only one Earth. Our science may increase its bounty and our husbandry may make its resources go further, but its capacity to support life cannot be indefinitely extended. If life on Earth is to be sustained, we shall have to care for the planet, and share it, better than we have done.

Human history occasionally reaches watersheds where fundamental policy changes become unavoidable. Such changes are demanded by governments, and of governments, and arise from deep changes in the perceptions of many people. The abolition of slavery, laws against child labour, and universal suffrage are earlier examples. History has reached another such watershed.

Those words began the Communique of the Brundtland Commission's Special Meeting in London in April 1992 - six weeks before UNCED convened in Rio. The Commission had proposed the Earth Summit in its report *Our Common Future* in 1987. In London, we called upon the world's leaders to commit the world's people to securing human survival through sustainable development. Our Communique concluded: 'We urge them by their actions to inspire present generations with an ethic of caring for the Planet which will allow future generations to inherit the gift of life and to sustain and the pass it on to their successors'. Can we rest after Rio, secure in the knowledge that they did so? I am afraid the answer is 'No'.

Historians will record that when the leaders of the world's people met at Rio in an emergency discussion on humanity's common future, they met behind flags that were a constant reminder of the narrow domestic walls that kept them apart. The artificiality of national boundaries is today symbolised by the transnational character of most environmental problems. Hot air currents, oceans and continental rivers do not recognise frontiers. The threats from depletion of the ozone layer and global warming are not to isolated communities or countries; they have a planetary

sweep. Chernobyl fall-out reached farms as far afield as Ireland. Tree cutting in Nepal has led to flooding in Bangladesh, and the loss of trees in Ethiopia has caused water supply problems in Sudan and Egypt.

'No man is an island unto himself wrote the poet Donne four centuries ago. In this region of the world, the Maldives is discovering that no island is an island unto itself. If the scientific consensus on global temperature rise is proved right, a consequent rise in the sea level could submerge many islands of the Maldives. As part of our ocean floor, they could become a symbol of our failure to preserve the earth as a habitable place for all.

Frontiers may separate nations; they do not insulate them from a degraded environment. Environment problems are ultimately international problems. They simply cannot be solved nationally in any comprehensive sense. A partnership for survival is our generation's compelling obligation to future generations.

It will require a later historical judgment to assess the real impact of the Earth Summit; but some matters that will bear on that assessment are already evident. 'Rio' will certainly symbolise the time when humanity reached the watershed on environment and development of which the Brundtland Commission spoke. In the longer perspective of history that must undoubtedly be the primary judgement: that at Rio humanity reached a turning point and began, however, uncertainly, the journey towards survival. In that respect, the Earth Summit was a historic achievement; and the entire UNCED process was service of great worth. Pakistan played a notable role in that process as leader of the Group of 77.

Yet when at the end of the Summit, Mrs. Brundtland said that we had taken neither a small step nor a giant step nor a giant leap, I understood her. The wide acknowledgement, for example, of the place of development was not a small step. The case, so cogently urged in *'Our Common Future'*, for the link between environment and development, became (despite early resistance) a basic premise of Agenda 21. That is no small gain.

And yet, not giant leap at Rio. UNCED's achievements might have been larger in virtually every area: in Rio Declaration, in the Conventions on Climate Change and Biodiversity, in Agenda 21, on the issue of resources. Despite the recognition of the peril at hand, there was failure at the political level to make a wholly credible response.

But more worrying than disappointment over Rio's modest progress is the prospect that some of the resistance's that produced those disappointments may persist. The insistence, for example, of a few oil-producing countries that the final documents should not give prominence to 'new and renewable source of energy' signalled the existence of dangerous alliances in the war against unsustainable living. Such alliances contributed to the silences at Rio to which I now turn: the silences imposed during the negotiating process on the issues of 'consumption' and 'population' - what became the 'no go' areas of Rio. Let me deal first with population.

When the Rev Malthus was writing his Essay on the *Principle of Population* 200 years ago, world population was edging towards its first billion. It took just over 100 more years to reach the second billion. We are now adding almost a billion every 10 years.

The latest medium projection by UN demographers has world population, now 5.5 billion, touching 10 billion by the middle of the next century, continuing to grow for another hundred years or so before levelling off at about 11.6 billion. In the high projection, the numbers would swell by another two or three billion before peaking; but there are even higher projections that take us to 19 billion by 2100.

As much as 95 per cent of future growth will be in the developing countries, whose population is growing at the average rate of 2.1 per cent against an average of 0.5 per cent for the developed countries. There is no room to doubt that the pressure exerted by populations expanding at this pace will have serious environmental impacts.

In an unprecedented joint statement last year, the Royal Society in Britain and the National Academy of Sciences in the United States issued a warning in these terms: "if current predictions of population growth prove accurate and patterns of human activity on the planet remain unchanged, science and technology may not be able to prevent either irreversible degradation of the environment or continued poverty for much of the world."

The impact of people on their habitat is, of course, a complex one. Geography and climate, the distribution of wealth, the availability, ownership and fertility of land, the level of income, economic policies, technology, agricultural practices all have a bearing.

Generally speaking, in poor countries, as numbers rise there is more pressure on the land. Farming becomes more intensive; fallow periods between crops are abandoned and more pesticide and fertiliser applied. The result is early exhaustion and degradation of the land. Farming is also extended to more fragile areas - leading to soil erosion or desertification - or to forest land - when the result is the loss of trees and of species.

Higher yields per hectare may be possible in some countries but, as this region of the world is aware, Green Revolution technologies have posed not just social costs but other problems as well. Soil erosion, salinization and other forms of land degradation and ecological impacts reduce the gains from technology-based improvements in grain production.

Population increase exacerbates other environmental problems as well: water scarcity, inadequate sanitation and lack of fuel wood are all part of the daily environmental experience of millions in the South. Rapid population increase also spurs migration from rural areas, adding to congestion in urban areas and even producing environmental refugees.

Transborder movements apart, there will be severe pressures on the cities of the Third World. In 1960, of the ten largest cities in the world, only three were in developing countries. Now the position has been reversed. By the end of the decade there will be 20 cities with more than 11 million people each; 17 will be in developing countries.

Moreover, unlike urbanisation in the developed countries, urbanisation in most developing countries is outpacing industrial development and resulting in shantytowns, overcrowding, bad housing, inadequate water and sewage facilities, and armies of unemployed and underemployed people, some of whom can only survive through crime.

Neither rural nor urban areas will therefore escape environmental degradation if population growth continues unchecked. The people of the developing world, particularly the poorest people, will be the principal victims. It is therefore in the interests of our countries and people that the problem of rapid population growth should be tackled resolutely.

And developing countries for the most part have been tackling them resolutely. The average number of children per woman (the fertility rate) declined in developing countries from about 6.1 per woman in 1960/64 to about 4 per woman in 1985/90. The result has been 70 million fewer births per year - a momentous demographic change. They achieved that decline in less than 30 years. To go from a family of size of 6.5 to 3.5 the United States took 58 years.

In three decades the prevalence of contraceptive use has risen from 10 per cent to over 50 per cent in developing countries. The challenge to developed and developing countries alike is to assist the acceleration of these trends.

The demographic transition in Europe was achieved without the benefit of modern contraceptives. Economic development and rising prosperity were the primary means of achieving fertility decline. Our global community must create conditions in which couples in the developing world voluntarily seek a lower number of children - of surviving children. Reducing poverty, improving health and education, raising the status of women and enlarging their opportunities: these can increase the impact of contraceptive family planning services. But this is precisely the time when development assistance is stagnating and development cooperation weakening. And the distribution as assistance remains grossly skewed and influenced by political and commercial considerations rather than those of development or need.

As a result, for instance, only a quarter of development assistance goes to the ten countries containing three-quarters of the world's poor. And only 6.5 per cent of bilateral assistance from industrial countries is earmarked for such human priority concerns as primary health care, basic education, safe drinking water, nutrition, and family planning.

The weakening of development cooperation beyond aid is even more inexcusable. Protectionism is a fact of economic life for developing countries. Despite all the talk about free trade and the insistence on developing countries opening up their markets, the United States and the EEC in particular have adopted a kind of apartheid double-speak in their range of right sounding trade wrongs: 'orderly marketing arrangements', 'voluntary export restrictions'. There is now a second generation of these perverse labels: 'managed trade', 'results oriented negotiations', 'European preference', 'social dumping', 'strategic industries'. So how does the Third World export, how does it sell, how does it develop in ways which encourage the demographic transition? The ending of the Uruguay Round will not in itself provide the answer.

The matter of financial resources for development is particularly relevant to the implementation of Agenda 21. At the Earth Summit, there was no firm commitment of 'new and additional resources'. The question of resources from rich countries - the 20 per cent of the resources required to catalyse the much greater contribution from the poor themselves - was deferred: at best, for consideration by the rich among themselves; at worst, ad infinitum. Agenda 21 was

agreed, but in effect made subject to the provision of resources. Most of the resources for development are generated within developing countries themselves; but there is often a gap to be plugged by external help if development is to succeed. Major industrial countries, which happily spent trillions of dollars on military security - much with dubious cost-effectiveness - now gag at the prospect of spending a small fraction of those sums to achieve greater global security through development.

Of course, assistance should be prudently managed. But there is a deeper problem: a failure by Western political leaders, and intellectuals, to grasp the magnitude of the opportunity that now exists to make the world safer through policies of enlightened economic self-interest. What is required - reflecting, naturally, the changed nature of today's problems - is something of the energy, commitment and urgency of the post-war Marshall Plan.

The logo of UNCED depicted the Earth 'In Our Hands'. It asserted that sustainable development required a shared effort by all the world's people, a partnership for survival. The partnership, of course, is not between equals. Developed and developing countries are unequal in responsibility for getting it wrong and in capacity for setting it right. Aristotle instructed us a long time ago that equity between unequals requires not 'reciprocity' but 'proportionality'. Proportionality must be the ethical touchstone of the role of developed and developing countries in their partnership for survival through sustainable development. And, proportionality requires a significant effort from the rich in precisely such linked areas as poverty and population.

It is not in our interest to be reticent on the population issue. It is understandable that we have tended to be, because the developed world so often asserts that the problem of environment can be overcome if only developing countries curb population growth rates. In other words, they; say, the world is running out of space and resources, and it is all the fault of the poor. To avoid the issue, however, is to perpetuate the myth and, in the process, to do damage to our national environments.

We do have to bring population growth rates down in our own self-interest; and we have to bring them down in the interest of life on the planet. That latter interest we share with all countries, which is why in their own interest developed countries must assist us in making the demographic transition through real development across the board. We must not be nervous about asserting this. We must take on the population issue; acknowledging that we can and will contribute. But we must be no less clear in stating the limits to what we can do without assistance - not just in the population sector, but in development generally. We must not encourage the kind of silences in which we acquiesced at Rio.

There is another, deeper reason why we must explode the myth of the Third World's responsibility for the population crisis; and there is an important difference here between the population explosion and the crisis it generates. It is a difference that goes to that heart of the matter of proportionality. Next year, at Cairo, the world will attempt to respond to the issue of population. Obliged to break the silence to Rio, there will be some who will attempt to deal with the explosion, not the crisis. Developing countries need to approach Cairo with well thought out strategies. For me, the quintessential element of that strategy must be that at Cairo the silence is

broken not just on population but on consumption as well. And this bring me to the other, and in every respect more sinister, area of silence at Rio.

Why are we concerned about a population explosion? If we are, as we believe, that best thing that has happened to the Planet, why shouldn't more of us be ever welcome? The real reason for our concern is described as Earth's 'carrying capacity'; it is our impact on the biosphere through what we use and what we waste. When we ask whether Planet Earth can sustain double its present human population, the answer has to do with consumption. If we continue to draw from nature at the rate we do today - we consume at today's level - such a doubling may not be sustainable. Remember that words of the British and American scientists: *If current predictions of population growth prove accurate and patterns of human activity on the planet remain unchanged, science and technology may not be able to prevent either irreversible degradation of the environment or continued poverty for much of the world* 'If, ... patterns of human activity in the Planet remain unchanged': they were talking about 'consumption'.

In 1986 - while the Brundtland Commission was still working - an American scientist, Peter Vitousek, (and others) published (in 'BioScience') a study entitled 'Human Appropriation of the Products of Photosynthesis'. Photosynthesis is nature's solar-powered food-making process. Its product is the material that sustains all life. Only 70 years ago human requirements took about 10 per cent of the life-sustaining product of photosynthesis on land - 10 per cent of annual growth. Hence the belief, then and long afterwards, that nature was limitless and inexhaustible. Vitousek and his colleagues calculated that by the mid-1980s the 5 billion people on Earth had raised that appropriation to 40 per cent. As our numbers double to over 10 billion, they concluded, it may be impossible for human appropriation to double to 80 per cent. In other words, it may not be possible - let alone desirable - for us to continue on our present consumption path.

To succeed in doing so, we would have to preempt other animal life in a desperate human scramble to enlarge land cultivation and corner all its product for ourselves. Science and technology may increase the solar- powered productivity of nature's plants, but we are also cutting back production as desertification, urban growth, soil erosion, and pollution all steadily decrease the Earth's green cover.

In any event, after taking 80 per cent of Earth's life-sustaining material around 2050, humankind would not be far from the absolute limit of 100 per cent. The only thing left for us would be aquatic plant life. Our processing technologies would turn them to human use, but most likely they would provide only fractional relief. But, well before our continental food stores ran out, men, women and children would have been embroiled in a primitive internecine struggle for survival - a struggle over consumption.

The problem, however, is not only the level of human consumption but also its skewed pattern. At present, about one quarter of the world's population (mostly in industrial countries) account for about three-quarters of the world's net annual consumption of resources of all kinds. The other-quarters of the world's people must get by on the remaining one-quarter of the resource pie.

Estimates vary as to the consumption of the rich and poor in the world. In UNDP's 1993 Paul Hoffman Lecture, the President of the Population Council, Margaret Catley-Carlson, used the estimate that 'every child born in the North consumes over a lifetime from 20-30 times the resources and accounts for 20-39 times the waste - year in and year out - of their counterparts in developing countries'. The British ecologist Norman Myers has made a similar point: 'The average British family (he wrote) comprises two children, but when we factor in resource consumption and pollution impacts, and then compare the British lifestyle with the global average, the 'real world' size of a British family is more like 15-25 children. 'On this basis, the 1.2 billion people of the North could be taken as the equivalent, in relation to consumption, of 24 billion people in the developing world - using conservation estimates. They already impose on the Planet the burden of a century of the unborn of the South.

So where is the time bomb ticking? The truth is that there are many explosions in the making. The 95 per cent of world population growth that will take place in the South is one of them -and with dire implications for people in the South. But the 5 per cent of world population growth attributable to the North is as large or larger an explosion - not in relation to numbers, but to what the numbers imply for the Planet. Perhaps the whole analogy of time bombs ticking away is misleading for the bombs have been detonated already; the explosions have occurred. What is needed is containment: rolling back consumption levels in the North.

There is a further point about consumption. We cannot realistically project population growth in the South into the 21st century at the same levels of consumption that prevail there today. The South will not always remain abysmally poor. Already East Asia is showing the way, and the world economic centre of gravity is shifting away from North America and Europe. Moreover, it is going to be in the world's interest - very specifically in the interest of reducing population growth rates - that development should be a reality throughout the South.

But what development? Development which, partly thanks to 'CNN' and 'Sky' and 'Star' and all the other communication wonders that lie in store for us, mimics the consumption culture of the West? If so, we can think of the burden on the Planet, not as a doubling but as something nearer a ten-fold increase in the world's population - of an Armageddon long past the horrors of the Vitousek projection.

The silence on consumption at Rio was the silence of guilt and, beyond guilt, a forlorn hope that if decisions can be deferred long enough, and, solutions sought in other directions, changing the lifestyles of the rich may not after all be necessary. But silence does not change reality and the hope of eternal deferment is a forlorn one. What is not a valid assumption is that changing lifestyles necessarily implies a diminishing quality of life. It might, in fact, involve for many the very opposite. What is certain is that one cannot safely measure the quality of life in terms of money or material possessions.

In truth, we are at a time of great questioning about the quality of life in high consumption societies. The American writer Raymond Chandler once described Los Angeles, although it could have been New York, or Tokyo, or London, or Paris, as 'a city no worse than others, a city rich and vigorous and full of pride; a city lost and beaten and full of emptiness'. He might have

added a city whose lifestyle stands for mindless materialism, a lack of morality and basic values, for alienation of the individual in the maze of what T S Eliot in 'The Wasteland' called the 'unreal city'. Alongside fine buildings and parks, many of today's large cities also have street children, people with no home but the pavements, drug addiction, squalor, violence, and alienation. Future generations in today's industrial societies may be more ready than we think to change their lifestyles in the interest of survival with a higher quality of life. Silence about consumption is a silence the human species cannot afford. Breaking that silence is a pre-requisite of attaining global sustainability.

That bring us back to enlightenment. It is enlightenment that precedes change and shapes it. This surely should give us hope, since it is our cerebral gift most of all that sets us apart from other species. The same capacities that have borne the human race to great peaks of achievement have allowed it to adapt in the face of threats. But as change must be driven by reason, so it has to be guided by ethics as well. Unless it is, we will not be true to ourselves or to the generations that follow us.

I recall Barbara Ward's quiet assertion: 'We are either going to become a community, or we are going to die'. Without a sense of human identity transcending national loyalties, without an acknowledgement of others on the planet as fellow countrymen and women, without a conception of the world as one human community, without the vision of a world beyond frontier and sovereignties, we are unlikely to summon up the will to act together to find our way and save our human species.

Nothing should weigh more heavily with us than our obligation to future generations. The concept of sustainable development crystallises our obligations when it speaks of ‘meeting the needs'. In a very real sense, we do 'borrow the present from the future'. That means at least that we must care for the Earth while it is in our keeping and hand it over unimpaired. Perhaps earlier civilization understood this better. When the leaders of the Iroquois Indian people in North America met in their Council to take important decisions, they began with this commitment: 'In our every deliberation we must consider the impact of our decisions on the next seven generations'. Is there a national council in any of our continents today that is guided by consideration of the impact of its decisions on even the next generation? How often do we look even beyond the next election?

We have already so depreciated our stock of ecological capital that we cannot deliver the planet our heirs in pristine condition. We have already betrayed our trust to future generations by irreversibly lowering the quality of life they can sustain, whatever their best efforts. And we have begun now to threaten not only; their quality of life but their right to life itself. We can plead that for most of the time it was wrongdoing unwittingly wrought. But even that plea will not hold any longer we now know the consequences of our conduct: for ourselves, and for those who will inherit our fractured civilization.

Some of these heirs are already with us. They know what we are doing to their planet, and they are calling on us to stop. That plea will grow more insistent, and more angry, if we fail to show a

change of heart - if we fail to adopt an Earth ethic that acknowledges our obligations to our children and the need to give them a chance to do better than we have done.

There is a spirit of human solidarity stirring among the young; many are ready to show by example that they care about their neighbour and recognise that their neighbour now is everyone on earth. They do not have places at Summit; but we would do well to listen to their voices. John Lennon spoke lyrically for them when he sang:

> *No need for greed or hunger,*
> *A brotherhood of man,*
> *Imagine all the people,*
> *Sharing all the world.*

He did not know it; but he might have been pre-empting some of the silences of Rio.

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