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GENERAL ASSEMBLY

PROVISIONAL VERBATIM RECORD OF THE THIRTY-FIFTH MEETING

Held at Headquarters, New York,
on Monday, 24 October 1988, at 10 a.m.

President: Mr. CAPUTO (Argentina)

later: Mr. DLAMINI (Vice-President) (Swaziland)

- Conservation of climate as part of the common heritage of mankind [148]
- Elections to fill vacancies in subsidiary organs and other elections [16] (continued)

  (a) Election of members of the Governing Council of the United Nations Environment Programme: draft decision
- Organization of work

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The meeting was called to order at 10.20 a.m.

AGENDA ITEM 148

CONSERVATION OF CLIMATE AS PART OF THE COMMON HERITAGE OF MANKIND

The PRESIDENT (interpretation from Spanish): As members will recall, at its 3rd plenary meeting the General Assembly decided, on the recommendation of the General Committee, that, prior to the consideration of item 148, entitled "Conservation of climate as part of the common heritage of mankind" by the Second Committee, the item would be introduced at a plenary meeting.

Accordingly, the item will be introduced at this meeting.

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Mr. TABONE (Malta): Mr. President, although the representative of my country has already expressed our congratulations to you on your election, I am honoured to repeat them in person, knowing full well that under your guidance the work of the Assembly will go forward as it has since your election.

May I first express my very deep appreciation for the opportunity I have been given to address this plenary meeting of the General Assembly to introduce formally the item entitled "Conservation of climate as part of the common heritage of mankind". Indeed, the holding of this plenary meeting specifically for this purpose is considered by my Government as a rare privilege which consolidates further its resolve to continue contributing, in its own limited way, to the formidable work undertaken by the United Nations in the promotion of international peace and co-operation for the well-being of mankind.

Just over 20 years ago, in 1967, Malta, a newly independent State, proposed the inclusion in the agenda of the twenty-second session of the General Assembly of an item entitled "Examination of the question of the reservation exclusively for peaceful purposes of the sea-bed and the ocean floor, and the sub-soil thereof, underlying the high seas beyond the limits of present national jurisdiction, and the use of their resources in the interest of mankind." As is well known, this initiative led to the convening of the third United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea, which culminated in the promulgation of a comprehensive constitution regulating mankind's use of the oceans - the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.

In 1969 Malta yet again proposed, for inclusion in the agenda of the twenty-fourth session of the General Assembly, an item entitled "Question of the Elderly and the Aged". The Maltese proposal was accepted and subsequently considered by the Third Committee of the General Assembly. This initiative encouraged the development of a world-wide consciousness of the problem of aging

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(Mr. Tabone, Malta)

which led to the adoption in 1982 of the Vienna International Plan of Action on Aging, elaborated under the chairmanship of a Maltese representative presiding over the Committee of the Whole at the world Assembly. This year there was established in Malta the International Institute on Aging, inaugurated by the Secretary-General.

These two initiatives taken by the Government of Malta - of which, as a cabinet-member, I then had the privilege to form part - originally aroused astonishment, if not suspicion, in the minds of some delegations. It was not easy for them to understand how one of the smallest Members of the international community - only a few years after its independence - could take such initiatives single-handedly.

With respect to the 1967 initiative, one distinguished personality publicly asked if Malta was the sound ng-board of another State.

It may be pertinent to reiterate what was stated at that time by Mr. Arvid Pardo, Malta's United Nations Ambassador:

"Our proposal was formulated entirely without the benefit of advice from other countries and I can categorically state that we are not a sounding-board for any State and that nobody put the Maltese Government up to it."

I have felt it necessary to recall this issue in the early stages of my address because this categorical statement of our representative in 1967 applies equally to the latest Maltese initiative concerning the "Conservation of climate as part of the common heritage of mankind".

Malta is determined to play a constructive role in the important work which the United Nations undertakes on behalf of mankind. We are conscious that the United Nations is dependent for its effectiveness on the unreserved support of the major Powers. Nevertheless, it is our firm belief that smaller States can also validly contribute to the work and efforts carried out by the United Nations. We feel that one area where small States - like my own - can play a vital role is that

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(Mr. Tabone, Malta)

of ensuring that the United Nations is constantly attuned to the growing and changing needs of mankind. Smaller States, possibly because of their very size and lack of major vested interests, can and are able to react faster to the evolving problems facing the world. Thus, they can reflect the conscience of mankind freely suggesting ideas and approaches which can assist the United Nations to keep "pace with the rapidly evolving human situation around the globe", as Secretary-General Perez de Cuellar noted when inaugurating the International Institute on Aging, in Malta, established together with the United Nations. It is a role which the catalytic effects of Malta's 1967 and 1969 initiatives amply prove, for in each case they led to a major declaration adopted by universal consensus.

My Government decided to take action at this session of the General Assembly due to the urgent need to conserve climate in the interests of mankind by protecting it against negative man-made changes. We are convinced that there should be global recognition of the fundamental right of every human being to enjoy climate in a state which best sustains life. As Sir Crispin Tickell observed in his outstanding and foresighted study Climatic Change and World Affairs, "Climate is a condition of life. We are all a product of its vagaries. When it changes, so must we."

Indeed, it is widely accepted that in recent years climate has been changed by various activities of the human beings that inhabit planet Earth - some five billion of them.

These activities are seriously disturbing the balance of nature. Our attitude and approach to climate should change in such a manner as to limit or remove any adverse effects of our activities. No longer can we afford to take climate for granted, as previous generations may have done. Climatic change, particularly global warming, may threaten the very existence of life on earth. Unless urgent

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action on a global level is taken, this change could very well lead to irreversible damage.

Increasing concentrations of so-called greenhouse gases - particularly carbon dioxide - emitted mainly through the burning of fossil fuels, are likely to produce a substantially warmer climate. These gases, whose concentration in the atmosphere is rapidly increasing, absorb more of earth's radiation and return more of it back to earth. This energy, which would otherwise escape harmlessly into space, is already increasing the earth's surface temperature.

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If this process remains uncontrolled, the greenhouse effect - amplified through massive deforestation and changing land-use patterns - will contribute to a distressing increase in global mean temperature producing major changes in climate. It would be presumptuous of me to attempt to give an accurate and comprehensive forecast of the effects climatic change could have on life on Earth. Nevertheless, there exists, I feel, enough serious scientific evidence to suggest that certain catastrophic consequences could occur. By the middle of the next century, the Earth will, on the basis of current scientific expectations, face a rise in temperature which could have a serious impact on agriculture, water-resource management, and certain climate-sensitive socio-economic activities. The thermal expansion of sea water could adversely affect the well-being of numerous coastal communities as well as marine life.

Humanity also faces the problem of ozone layer depletion caused primarily by the emission of chlorofluorocarbons. Such emission, in certain circumstances, depletes the ozone layer - which surrounds the globe and protects it from excessive solar ultraviolet radiation - producing serious effects such as an increase in the incidence of skin cancer and cataracts, as well as a lowering of the yield of certain crops and detrimental effects on plant life. Furthermore, changes in the distribution of ozone, itself a greenhouse gas, could affect the Earth's average temperature through, for example, an increase in tropospheric ozone and a decrease in stratospheric ozone.

In the face of these and other phenomena, it is essential that action be taken on a global level to ensure that our planet remains fit to sustain life. We feel that the adoption of the 1985 Vienna Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer and the related 1987 Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer constitute important milestones in the management of a global problem before it causes irreparable harm to human well-being.

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(Mr. Tabone, Malta)

No one in this Chamber or elsewhere would wish climate to be allowed to deteriorate by the hand of man beyond recuperable limits. Such a statement is perhaps appropriate in the light of recent experiences following the application of momentous discoveries in various scientific fields where eagerness to be the first in the exploitation of the benefits of such discoveries has led the world to face the tremendous difficulties of safely disposing of radioactive and toxic waste and the long-term effects of certain drugs.

It is recognized that not enough is known on the phenomena leading to climatic change and to what extent these phenomena are being affected by processes attributable to man. We also recognize that more fundamental research is needed into the areas where the geosphere - including the atmosphere, the oceans, and terrestial habitats - interacts with the biosphere.

We are encouraged by the valuable work and research already conducted on climatic change both within and outside the United Nations system. Within the United Nations system substantial work has been carried out particularly by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the World Meterological Organization (WMO). The World Climate Conference of 1979 and the World Climate Programme, established by the Eighth World Meteorological Congress, are important landmarks in the international effort to establish an understanding of the global climate system. We note that, whilst a number of other United Nations agencies are involved, there still does not exist effective co-ordination of all the work on climatic change undertaken within the United Nations system. However, we feel that the Consultative Meeting of Heads of United Nations bodies and organs on environmental matters last July, wherein attention was given to climatic change, is a step in the right direction. Such a consultative process should, in my view, be extended in the United Nations system to all interested agencies.

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(Mr. Tabone, Malta)

We welcome the formation of an intergovernmental panel on climate change, which is due to meet in November 1988, and Malta intends to participate fully in its work.

Malta looks forward to the convening of the second World Climate Conference. This important Conference should review all aspects of the World Climate Programme with emphasis on the socio-economic benefits of climate, especially in developing States.

Valuable work has also been undertaken outside the United Nations. The International Council of Scientific Unions has been in the forefront in the scientific study of the global climate system. The Beijer Institute has held a number of very important meetings on developing policies for responding to climatic change. The Woods Hole Research Center in Massachusetts held, only last September, an important workshop on global climatic change. The Commonwealth has established an expert group on climatic change and sea-level rise which is due to report to Heads of Government when they meet in Kuala Lumpur in 1989. We also feel the need to refer to the 1985 Villach Conference, the Villach and Bellagio 1987 workshops on developing policies for responding to climatic change, the international conference held in Toronto last June on "The Changing Atmosphere: Implications for Global Security" and the forthcoming conference on "Climate and Development" to be held in Hamburg. Such international conferences should have a major impact on the development of our policies on climatic change and will assist in alerting public opinion in our Member States.

We are also encouraged that during the last few weeks, many delegations and eminent personalities have expressed their concern on the issue of climatic change and urged that action should accordingly be taken.

(Mr. Tabone, Malta)

Nevertheless, we feel that climate is so essential to mankind that a comprehensive and effective strategy on a global level is urgently required to conserve climate in the interest of mankind. We need to ensure that, in view of the magnitude of the problem and the relatively limited resources available, current efforts being undertaken be adequately co-ordinated.

It is useful to recall the impressive and illuminating statement made by the Prime Minister of Norway, Mrs. Gro Harlem Brundtland, Chairperson of the World Commission on Environment and Development. In her view, the impact of world climatic change over the next decades:

"may be more drastic for mankind than any other challenges except for nuclear war."

(Mr. Tabone, Malta)

It is precisely because the issue of climatic change is so very closely linked with the question of mankind's very survival that Malta has requested that the United Nations devise a strategy to ensure that climate is conserved in the interests of present and future generations.

We firmly believe that the doctrine of the common heritage of mankind is relevant to the problems raised by climatic change. The common-heritage concept, which dates back to the 19th century, was first proposed, on Malta's initiative, in an international forum at the Third United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea. It has subsequently been incorporated in two major international instruments: the 1979 Agreement Governing the Activities of States on the Moon and other Celestial Bodies, which declares the moon and its natural resources to be the common heritage of mankind; and the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, which declares certain areas of the oceans and their resources to be the common heritage of mankind.

The application of relevant aspects of the common-heritage principle to climate would recognize one of climate's fundamental characteristics: climate is one of the few truly natural conditions which determine life on earth and is, therefore, an integral part of man's natural heritage. The conservation of the global climate system - which "involves the atmosphere, oceans and land surface (including vegetation) and cryosphere, all of which interact in complex ways over a wide range of time-scales" - is so essential and vital to the very existence of life that it cannot be left to individual States unilaterally to decide what, if any, conservation measures should be taken. The fundamental human right to life and the need to conserve climate as one of the prerequisites of human life cannot be limited by political boundaries and therefore requires an international strategy which transcends State sovereignty in the interests of present and future human generations.

(Mr. Tabone, Malta)

The common-heritage doctrine, which has so far been widely accepted and applied with respect to the moon and certain areas of the sea-bed, entails major proprietary and economic considerations, ensuring that mankind can participate in the benefits of the exploitation of resources in the said areas.

Through Malta's present initiative, we are now proposing the extension, with such modifications as are appropriate, of this doctrine to climate as one of the essential conditions for man's survival on earth. We recognize that this application is different from that found in the other two cases, as it entails not direct economic gain but the very survival of man himself. Climatic change is a common concern of mankind, which is a corollary of the common-heritage doctrine, requiring a conservation strategy the application of which cannot be restricted by political boundaries and must necessarily have as its primary objective the common good of mankind. In short, what Malta is today proposing is a development and an elaboration of the doctrine of the common heritage of mankind for its application to a new area - climatic change, particularly global warming.

Having outlined the situation as we see it, may I be allowed to make some proposals.

We must ensure that a balance is achieved between the short-term requirements and the future needs of mankind. The application of the principle of the common concern of mankind to cl mate ensures that climate is a natural resource which can be utilized by each State within its territory in the process of its social and economic development but, at the same time, it cannot be tampered with or abused at the expense and to the detriment of mankind.

As the Prime Minister of Malta, Edward Fenech Adami, has pertinently observed in his analysis of the common-heritage doctrine:

(Mr. Tabone, Malta)

"The philosophy of the common heritage is against leaving things to luck and in favour of discovering and increasing order where, on the face of it, there may appear to be chaos and confusion".

Malta could hardly claim to be the first State to bring the problem of climatic change to the attention of the United Nations, for, as I have already stated, very important work within the United Nations system has already been undertaken in this respect. Malta, however, is now proposing to the General Assembly that an appropriate high-level co-ordinating mechanism - which, in my view, could well be the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change - undertake immediate action with respect to an interdisciplinary review of the state of the science of climate and the phenomenon of climatic change with special emphasis on global warming and its socio-economic implications. Malta will present a concrete proposal in the form of a draft resolution, which will be submitted for consideration in the Second Committee.

Malta expects the support of every Member State in this important endeavour to conserve climate, for, as the Secretary-General has pertinently noted in his report to the current session on the work of the Organization, the state of the earth's environment, which includes climate, is

"pre-eminently a problem that should evoke a solidarity of response from all nations. It has, however, reached a stage where, without a global ethic and the necessary law, it can give rise to divisive issues with political implications." (A/43/1, p. 18)

In is our view that any strategy in respect of climatic change will have to take into account the characteristics and levels of development of the various regions of the world. Certainly we feel that there exist a number of effective measures which can be undertaken by all States. States, for instance, could be encouraged to develop policies that would promote energy conservation in order to

(Mr. Tabone, Malta)

reduce or eliminate certain human activities which have a negative or detrimental effect on climate. Certain measures will have to be adopted on a gradual basis, taking into account the requirements of sustainable development and other relevant circumstances.

Malta has tentatively initiated a process to enable, in our own small way, the development of a national consciousness on climatic change. We have acceded to the Vienna Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer and signed the related Montreal Protocol. I have established in my Ministry an advisory committee on climatic change, under the chairmanship of my personal adviser, Mr. Attard, and the University of Malta has set up a scientific committee with appropriate terms of reference.

In the face of the magnitude and the implications of the problem of climatic change, the resources for research and action are relatively limited. We must, therefore, avoid unnecessary duplication and ensure that the said resources are applied effectively in the interests of us all. We trust that our initiative, which significantly is being launched on United Nations Day, will contribute to the realization of these objectives in the most effective manner.

Sir Crispin TICKELL (United Kingdom): We welcome the initiative taken by the Government of Malta in inscribing the issue of climate change on the agenda of this year's session of the General Assembly. It was very generous of the Maltese Foreign Minister to have referred to and quoted from my book on climate in his speech. I am only one of the many who recognize that climate change is of enormous complexity and far-reaching importance, but it is only one of the problems affecting the future health of our planet.

My Government has long been concerned about the accelerating increase in the greenhouse gases. In a recent address to the Royal Society in London, the leading British scientific institution, Mrs. Thatcher spoke of the fear that we were creating a global heat trap which could lead to climatic instability. She pointed out that an average warming effect of one degree centigrade per decade would greatly exceed the capacity of our natural habitat to cope. Such a rate of warming would cause eventual melting of glacial ice and a consequent rise in the sea level of several feet over the next century. Sir Geoffrey Howe pointed out in the general debate in the Assembly last month that the increases predicted in global temperatures could have substantial effects within the new few decades on life and human society. Even small variations would have big consequences in a crowded world.

The problem arises from two main sources: industrial activity in one part of the world and land use and management in the rest. The most sensitive issues for human society that change could bring relate first to patterns of rainfall, with their impact on agriculture, forestry and natural ecology; and secondly, on a longer timescale, to rises in sea level. The impact of changing rainfall would obviously vary between regions. Current models are not yet capable of predicting regional and seasonal information. But, even if the cards of climatic advantage were redealt between countries, the biggest threat to all would be the

(Sir Crispin Tickell, United Kingdom)

dislocation caused by change itself. Change would be especially important in marginal agricultural areas; in short, those least able to cope with it - in other words, the world's poor.

Average sea levels have risen by some 10 to 15 centimetres already over the last century. If this trend should accelerate, low-lying regions throughout the world would be threatened. In such countries as Bangladesh, Egypt, the Maldives and the Netherlands, the effects of a rise in sea levels could be disastrous. Low-lying areas on the east coast of my own country would be threatened. Many countries would need to erect new and larger coast defences where feasible. This would be, it goes without saying, a serious drain on economic resources.

There are still great uncertainties about climatic trends. Some countries have already embarked on extensive programmes of scientific research. In Britain we have a major research programme at our Meteorological Office, where we provide one of the world's four centres for the study of climatic change through global climate modelling. My Government is also increasing its research effort on climate impact. But, like other environmental problems, such change can best be tackled through concerted international action. We attach particular importance to co-ordinated research to reduce the current range of uncertainties. We play a full part in the World Climate Programme. We welcome the establishment of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change by the United Nations Environment Programme, the World Meteorological Organization and the International Council of Scientific Unions. The Intergovernmental Panel, on which senior British scientists will serve, will need to work out co-ordinated assessments of the likely range of future greenhouse warming and the associated climate impacts. This