



94-09-06: Statement of Sri Lanka, H.E. Mr. Bradman Weerakoon

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AS WRITTEN

Statement by Mr. Brahman Weerakoon
 Leader of the Sri Lanka Delegation at the
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Mr Chairman,

Permit me to join in congratulation you on your election as
 Chairman of this most important Conference. We extend to you the warm
 good wishes of the Government and people of Sri Lanka for your
 successful stewardship of this Meeting. Indeed, no better choice than
 Cairo, the capital city of one of the world's greatest civilizations

could have been made for this our final meeting on Population and Development in this century. As we embark; together on taking the crucial decisions that will ensure for the world's people, a future of peaceful and orderly progress, we have no doubt that the spirit of the past and the formidable challenges of the present, will inspire and illuminate our vision of the 21st century.

Sri Lanka is privileged to share its experiences and its achievements with other member states gathered here as we collectively endeavour to chart a course of action for our common future. As a result of enlightened social and economic policies followed since independence 46 years ago, Sri Lanka has today reached the final phase of its demographic transition. Influenced also by some outmigration, the annual rate of population growth has come down to 1.2%. Our total fertility rate is 2.2. The estimated life expectancy at birth for women is almost 75 years. All this has been achieved at a modest per capita income of around US\$ 550.

How were we able to move ahead with our demographic transition in spite of a low per capita income? A strong democratic tradition, people's participation in decision making and a receptive political leadership enabled the allocation of resources to human development. Education and Health continue to receive heavy investment. Primary Education has been compulsory and free for decades. Literacy rates for men and woman alike have reached around 90%. Education, for girls too, has always been a driving force in the Sri Lanka value system.

At secondary and tertiary levels also the percentage of females is impressively high. One of the profound consequences of female education, and its corollary, the high proportional of females in the

workforce, has been the increase in the age of marriage which stands today at 24 years for females and 28 for males.

The investments in the Health sector too have had impressive consequences. Our infant mortality rates today are down to 19.4 per 1,000 live births. The maternal mortality rate is 40 per 100,000 - one of the lowest in the region. Education, and the knowledge that children who are born will survive, impel a demand for Family Planning services. The response both by Government and non-governmental sectors since the early 60s has been an effective Family Planning Programme in which information, supplies and services are being provided accessibly and affordably. Contraceptive prevalence today is at 66% of married women in the reproductive age group. Freedom of choice remains a cardinal principle in policy and programme.

The right of women to control their reproductivity and have equal access to information and safe family planning services, has received sanction through the Women's Charter, which was approved last year. The empowerment of women and the recognition of gender equality is enshrined in the Women's Charter, which promotes the proper understanding of parenting as a family and social responsibility and of equity in entitlement. The Charter calls too for the elimination of negative social attitudes to widows, single parents, single women and other vulnerable groups.

While progress has been satisfactory, we feel that there is no reason for complacency. Of the several challenges that have to be addressed in the future, 3 are of special importance.

Firstly, the health and quality of life of young people. While future projections point to ageing becoming a problem in the next century,

about half the population is today below the age of 25. Equipping youth to face the future will remain a major preoccupation. Protecting the rights of the child (defined as below 18) and ensuring their full participation in society, are becoming increasingly critical, in view of recent concerns regarding the levels of malnutrition, child labour and the practice of child prostitution.

As for young adults, and around 20% of the population are between the ages of 15 and 24, the need for education, counseling and services for adolescents are being increasingly felt.

Secondly, there is the need to focus more specifically on areas of vulnerability which may be masked by the national aggregated figures. Imaginative and innovative programs have, therefore, been devised to reach the currently under-served among the rural poor, plantation labor, the disabled, the single parent family and the urban slum dweller.

Thirdly, is the need for quality services all round. With assessments that around a quarter of the population is still below the poverty line, policies and programs to improve the quality of life of such vulnerable groups demand attention. The cooperation of the NGO and private sector, has been most encouraging moving towards the objective of improved quality of care .

In the considerable tasks that face us in the future, the support of the international community would be of the greatest value. As a country that has effectively and efficiently utilized domestic . and international resources in the realization of its goals , Sri-Lanka welcomes the recommendation in the Programme of Action that calls for increased funding for population and development programmes consistent

with the scale and scope of the activities required. Such support will enable us to continue our efforts at capacity-building and self-reliance.

Mr. Chairman,

My Statement would not be complete without a reference to the adverse consequences of the armed conflict that the North and East of our country has been subjected to for some time. This has resulted in problems of internally displaced persons, loss of production, shortages, and constraints in maintaining health and welfare standards of the civilian population. I am very happy to state that with the assumption to office of the new administration after the recent Elections, headed by Madam Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, the prospects are good for an end to the conflict and the political resolution of the problems. The benefits of the peace dividend, we feel, would be widespread and positive.

There is one final point I wish to make before I close. Clearly developing countries must do all that is possible to slow population growth rates both to improve the condition of life of their people, and in order that the earth's finite resources may be used to sustain our future continuing development. But this endeavour must be paralleled by a corresponding effort on the part of the developed world which has a much higher per capital use of world resources, to restrain their levels of consumption and the adoption of life-styles which conserve limited resources. If this does not happen, there would clearly be the perception that the rich will be preempting resources, which otherwise, may have been available for the improvement of the conditional of the poor. The creation of a common future, based on equity and justice, must call for

sacrifices in which all of us would necessarily have to share.

I thank you.

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