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Permanent Mission of St. Kitts and Nevis to the United Nations

Statement by

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Minister of Health and Women's Affairs

at the

Twenty-First Special Session of the General Assembly
On the Overall Review and Implementation of the
Programme of Action of the International Conference on
Population and Development (ICPD+5)

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Mr. President, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen:

Our attendance here today represents our commitment to advance the standard of living of our populations, a recognition of the magnitude of the global task of human development and the value of international collaboration and the commitment of the Government of St. Kitts and Nevis to the International Conference of Population and Development (ICPD) Plan of Action (POA).

The new development model of Trade Liberalisation, with its requisite reforms of our fiscal, trade and administrative policies do not leave much hope for growth and development of our small island states. Certainly not in the near future.

VULNERABILITY

Mr. President, the high level of vulnerability of small island states to external influences such as international financial crisis, and natural disasters which periodically retard our economic growth, suggests the need for an internationally agreed upon vulnerability index for application to countries that are seriously affected by external shocks such as these.

A key case in point, Mr. President, can be found in our recently completed berthing facility as part of our new Expansion Project in Basseterre of some 25 acres - Port Zante. With the advent of a single hurricane, Hurricane Georges, within months of its completion, a substantial part of this facility was completely destroyed. When projects of this magnitude are derailed, through no fault of government, the impact on our fragile economy is enormous. This is just one example, Mr. President, of how small states are vulnerable to external factors.

Our government would like to see a change in the tendency of International Financial Institutions, including the Bretton Wood Institutions to graduate countries from one socio-economic classification to another, based solely on economic indicators. Macroeconomic data cannot be considered in isolation, while ignoring the devastating impact of external forces on the true socio-economic profile of small island states, such as those comprising the Organisation of the Eastern Caribbean States (OECS).

WOMEN AND HEALTH ISSUES

Mr. President, in regard to the **critical** issues identified in the ICPD, POA, women and health issues factor quite heavily on our political agenda. We have a relatively young population with 52% of the population under the age of 25. Moreover, 34.3% are under the age of 15. And like countries, large and small, industrialized and non-industrialised, we are grappling with the challenge of teenage pregnancy. Our government has developed a policy that ensures the right of teen mothers to continue their education.

GENDER EQUITY

Mr. President, gender equity is a problem for many countries and as a fundamental principle of the POA, emanating from the Cairo Conference, the government of St. Kitts and Nevis is committed to improving the situation of women, especially those living in poverty. The Government has established a Ministry of Women's Affairs, which is responsible for handling issues such as domestic violence, the exercise of reproductive and sexual rights and the provision of appropriate health services. We have also introduced national programmes to strengthen the position of women in our society.

In our country we stress that men too, have a responsibility in ensuring that they overcome the stereotype that leads to gender inequality and this could only be achieved if there is a change in their mentality.

POPULATION

Mr. President, developing countries comprise more than 80% of the world's population. Population growth is occurring rapidly in these countries even though there is already much strain on land use. However, as the Cairo Conference of 5 years ago pointed out, the prospect of continued growth rates cause much concern not only to developing countries but to countries overall.

Not only is the availability of food a serious concern but so is the availability of water suitable for consumption. Some countries are already experiencing a serious decline in their water reserves. The tragedy of people drinking water contaminated by pesticides and other toxic chemicals highlights and contributes to growing water insecurity.

Mr. President, my country enjoys the unusual situation of a declining population, while most countries face constant increases. This decline in population is caused not only by reduction of the birth rate but by migration, as many of our educated and trained nationals leave to go abroad. Therefore, we lose many of our trained personnel to developed countries, which as a result, forces us on a high cost path of training and retraining of nationals - transfer of skills and technology in reverse.

EMPOWERMENT OF OUR PEOPLE

Mr. President, the empowerment of people forms an intrinsic part of our government's policy. We want our people to feel that they can and do contribute to society. Since the Cairo Conference, our government has expanded the number of secondary schools in our nation by 40% and we also provide fully equipped computer labs in secondary schools. We not only guarantee primary and secondary education to all children, but also provide scholarships for a large percentage of high school graduates to advance their education.

On assuming office in 1995, our government made a pledge to offer starter homes to lower income families. I am proud to report that, within four years, we have built 800 homes for lower income families.

Mr. President, our government takes the empowerment of youth very seriously. Our government worked with the private sector to arrange a Work Training Programme that provided job training for some 2,094 youths. Finding opportunities for so many youth to participate in this programme was a challenging task and the success achieved was outstanding as many of these youths were absorbed into the permanent workforce of the Federation. This work programme formed a strong foundation on which to build future projects of this kind.

Mr. President, I wish now to address the plight of the farmers in the Windward Islands and the negative impact that this imposes on their government's ability to fulfill their agreements made in Cairo. We are currently witnessing the tremendous weight on their shoulders brought on by the recent WTO ruling on preferential access to the European market for their bananas. Mr. President, no empowerment, can be sustained when people lack a stable income. All talks of empowerment ring shallow when small states such as Dominica, Grenada, St. Lucia, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines are forced into a completely untenable situation. The recent WTO decisions run contrary to development and threaten the livelihood of, in some cases, over 85% of the populations. This, Mr. President, is unbearable.

The struggle to maintain the Caribbean's preferential access to a minute segment of the European Market continues. Mr. President, the ongoing negotiations between the United States and the European Union must not sacrifice or destabilize the Caribbean region. We cannot talk about development on one hand and make decisions that create economic insecurity on the other. My government urges a just, quick and mutually beneficial outcome of the negotiations over bananas.

CONCLUSION

Mr. President, we were able to achieve much over the five years since Cairo but our progress is limited due to constraints and natural disasters. However, with fair trade practices and the assistance from international financial institutions, we could have achieved so much more. We cherish the principles of democracy, which are reflected in our free and just society. We welcome continued collaboration with international organisations and friendly nations so that we may continue to promote economic and social development for all of our people.

Thank you.