

AS WRITTEN

**STATEMENT TO THE TWENTY-FIRST SPECIAL SESSION
OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY**

by

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UNITED NATIONS

Mr. Chairman,
Dr. Sadik,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you. I would like to begin by extending my greetings and welcome to the distinguished delegates, representatives, observers and all others who are attending the 21st Special Session of the General Assembly.

I would like to express my congratulations to you, Mr. Chairman. Also, I would like to congratulate the other distinguished elected members elected to your Bureau. As always, my colleagues in the Population Division and I stand ready to assist you and this Committee in its vital work.

Mr. Chairman, often when I speak to bodies such as this, I introduce reports or present the findings of our studies. As a demographer, I deal with facts and figures, many of which are somewhat abstract, such as life expectancies, crude birth rate, and age dependency ratios, and so on. In my statement today, I would like to focus my remarks on what I have in this box in front of me.

This little box contains something that is familiar to nearly all of you and contains things that all of you know quite well. It's contents are acceptable to virtually all nations, cultures, religions and organizations. If there were more time, I would continue with the suspense, but let me open the box and show you what's in it.

Here it is . . . it's a piggy bank. This piggy bank is an object used by many people, but especially children, to save their coins for a specific purpose or goal.

Let me open it. But I'm not going to open it by breaking the bank. No, we will need this bank for the future. Let's open it from the bottom, via the rubber stopper and inspect the contents. It contains pennies . . . How many? Exactly 200 pennies, in fact.

Mr. Chairman, there are three billion people who have less than 200 pennies to live on each day. Yes, three billion people, half of the world's population, live on less than 200 pennies a day. Among them, 1.3 billion people do **not** have clean water; 130 million children do not go to school; and 40,000 children die every day because of hunger-related diseases. These startling statistics reflect unacceptable living conditions and levels of development for too many of the world's population.

Certainly, these pennies and other financial resources, alone, are not enough to address all the population and development issues facing the world today. However, without committing sufficient resources to the social and economic development of men, women and children, it is unlikely that we will be able to achieve a peaceful world with a richer life for all its people.

Mr. Chairman, as is widely known, today the world's population is nearly 6 billion. According to our most recent projections, the 6 billion population mark for the world's population will be reached in October of this year. The date of this occasions? Well, . . . we have calculated it to be the 12th of October. But the exact time and what place, we were not able to say with any confidence.

As some of the distinguished delegates may recall, the first population projection for the year 2000 prepared by the Population Division was done more than 40 years ago. At that time the Population Division projected a population for the year 2000 of slightly more than 6 billion. In the aftermath of the Second World War, when the world population was slightly above 2 billion, few believed that in less than 50 years the world population could reach 6 billion. Yet, the earliest projection of the United Nations Population Division for the year 2000 seems to be remarkably accurate.

Fifty years from now, the United Nations Population Division projects a much larger world population than exists today. We are anticipating a world close to 9 billion inhabitants, as the most likely figure.

Mr. Chairman, there are some who question our future population projections. There are some who can not imagine a world growing to 7, 8 or 9 billion people. There are even those who argue that the world's population is going to decrease.

Well, for those who doubt the projections of the United Nations Population Division, I, as Director, would like to make a wager ... let's call it "a friendly penny wager". The wager involves only pennies, such as those in front of me. And the duration of the wager is five years. In five years time, that is on 30 June 2004, we will meet in New York (or any other suitable place) to consider the size of the world's population. On my part, I will give to my opponent a penny for each person below the 6 billion population mark. And from my opponent, and this is important, I will receive a penny for each person above the 6 billion population mark. Mr. Chairman, I am prepared to make this "friendly penny wager" with as many takers as possible.

Mr. Chairman, in a few days, the 21st Special Session of the General Assembly will conclude and the attention of the distinguished delegates and the world community will move on to other issues, certainly many of them very important and critical, and deserving careful consideration.

However, at the centre of these other issues are two things that I have been talking about today, namely: pennies and population. Pennies or financial resources are essential for all development efforts. Speeches, documents and conferences need to be followed up by commitment, resources and action. Also, when we talk about any major issue facing the world community, we must consider population, in all its various dimensions, as a major factor. It is crucial that commitment and action be based on sound data and solid, scientific research. We in the United Nations stand ready to assist the international community in doing our part.

Mr. Chairman, while it is true that the future is uncertain, it is also true that now is the time for action. In the next 5, 10 or 20 years, there should be no looking back at missed opportunities; no regrets for action not taken; no lamenting: "Oh, ..., if only we had taken these steps years ago!" The decisions and actions of today will dramatically affect the quality of life and living conditions of future generations.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.