

April 24, 2002, Wednesday

SECTION: FEATURES; Pg. 2

LENGTH: 801 words

HEADLINE: OUR WAY OF LIFE MUST CHANGE RADICALLY IF WE ARE JUST TO SURVIVE;
DEVELOPMENT: JOHANNESBURG MUST GIVE US A VISION OF A GLOBAL SYSTEM IN WHICH EVERY COUNTRY HAS A PLACE AND A SHARE IN THE BENEFITS

BYLINE: Kofi Annan

BODY:

United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan outlines how to achieve and sustain development

THE World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg is not, as some people think, simply another conference on the global environment.

The whole idea of sustainable development is that environment and development are inextricably linked.

As our attention has been focused on conflict, on globalisation, or most recently on terrorism, we have often failed to see how these are connected to the issue of sustainability.

That word has become a pious invocation, rather than the urgent call to concrete action that it should be.

Prevailing approaches to development remain fragmented and piecemeal; funding is woefully inadequate; and production and consumption patterns continue to overburden the world's natural life support systems.

Sustainable development may be the new conventional wisdom, but many people have still not grasped its meaning.

One important task at Johannesburg is to show that it is far from being as abstract as it sounds. It is a life-or-death issue for millions upon millions of people.

Putting a human face on it, it could be a woman in a rural district in India, or almost any African country, who, year by year, finds she has to go further and further in search of water and fuel.

Her back aches from the long journey carrying a heavy load, but her heart aches even more from the fear that failure will expose herself and her children to hunger, thirst and disease.

How much longer can her way of life be sustained?

Another face might be that of a son or cousin of that woman who, precisely because that rural way of life was no longer sustainable for a growing population, is now living in an urban slum or shantytown.

He has no work, or rather lacks the training and resources needed to start work, though his community desperately needs the contribution he could make.

What is worse, although he does not know it, is that he is infected with HIV and has passed it on to his wife. How much longer can this way of life be sustained?

A third face might be that of someone who looks much better off than the first two. He lives in a house or apartment, owns a car and has a job in one of the rapidly growing east Asian cities. But at this moment he has been sitting in that car for an hour, and it is not moving. He is eager to get home to his wife and children but he is stuck among thousands like him, all pounding on their horns and still running their engines.

He also has a respiratory disease, caused by toxic chemicals in the factory where he works, and his children suffer from asthma.

He wants to get away from this environment and he is saving money to pay for false travel documents so that he can join his brother in Europe or North America. What he does not realise is that his way of life when he gets there may not be so very different. The more development follows this pattern, the less sustainable it is going to be in any part of the world.

Indeed, the fourth face may be that of any of us in this room.

We lead immensely privileged lives, compared to the vast majority of our fellow human beings. But we do so by consuming much more than our share of the earth's resources, and by leaving a much larger footprint of waste and pollution on the global environment.

Moreover, our way of life is highly visible to many who cannot share it, but who see it in glamorised form on flickering screens in those slums and shantytowns. It is, one could say, flaunted before them as the model of development to which they should aspire.

But is it sustainable, and if so, for how many people?

Certainly not, in its present form, for all the six billion who already inhabit this planet let alone the nine, or 12 or 15 billion who will inhabit it, depending on which scenario you adopt, in the decades to come.

Our way of life has to change, but how and how fast?

Far from being a burden, sustainable development is an exceptional opportunity to build markets and create jobs. To bring people in from the margins and to reduce tensions over resources that could lead to violence and to give every man and woman a voice, and a choice, in deciding their own future.

One thing we have learned over the years is that neither doom-and-gloom scenarios nor destructive criticism will inspire people and governments to act.

What is needed is a positive vision, a clear road map for getting from here to there, and a clear responsibility assigned to each of the many actors in the system.

Johannesburg must give us that vision - a vision of a global system in which every country has a place, and a share in the benefits.

This is an excerpt from a speech given at the London School of Economics

GRAPHIC: LEADER: Kofi Annan, UN Secretary General Picture: David Karp

LOAD-DATE: April 24, 2002