

ADDRESS BY THE REPRESENTATIVE
OF THE
UNITED NATIONS ENVIRONMENT PROGRAMME
TO THE
FIRST INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON THE IMPACT OF OIL SPILL IN THE PERSIAN GULF

Teheran, 20-27 May 1984

Your Excellencies,

Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen, dear friends,

It is an honour to address this meeting on behalf of Dr. Mostafa Tolba, the Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme and convey to you his greetings and best wishes for the success of the meeting.

UNEP was established twelve years ago with the mandate to co-ordinate activities related to the protection of human environment and to assist the States, whenever requested, in their efforts to provide safe environment for their own people.

The protection of the marine and coastal environment is among UNEP's highest priorities. According to the decisions of our Governing Council this goal should be achieved primarily through regional co-operation of States sharing mutual interests and problems in areas which for geographic, ecological or political reasons were perceived as forming a regional entity.

On this basis the Regional Seas Programme of UNEP was initiated in early 1974. It consists today of 11 regions 1/ involving more than 120 coastal states all over the globe. The regional action plans are usually supported by legally binding agreements of States participating in the plan.

The Islamic Republic of Iran is party to a regional action plan and a Convention, which was negotiated under UNEP's auspices and signed in Kuwait in 1978.

The purpose of the Convention was to provide the legal basis for a regional action plan calling for the co-operation of the states bordering the Persian Gulf on the protection and development of that region.

1/ Mediterranean, Kuwait Action Plan Region, West and Central Africa, Wider Caribbean, East Asian Seas, South-East Pacific, South Pacific, Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, East Africa, South-West Atlantic and South Asian Seas.

Initially UNEP provided the secretariat and co-ordinating mechanism for the Kuwait Action plan and Convention but a Regional Organization for the Protection of the Marine Environment (ROPME) was subsequently established to oversee the implementation of the Convention and the action plan. The Organization has its Headquarters in Kuwait and is guided by the meetings of a Ministerial Council which are regularly attended by your representatives. The staff of the Organization is recruited from your region and at present it includes one professional from the Islamic Republic of Iran. The Organization and its activities are financed by a special Trust Fund to which your government contributes generously.

The brief history of the Kuwait Action Plan shows that governments are not only aware of the dangers, but are prepared to conserve one of the world's most vulnerable marine environments. On the one hand, high rates of evaporation and shallow coastal waters and on the other, rapid economic development, combine to make this a high risk area.

The dangers are many and diverse: they come from untreated sewage, from toxic wastes, from sulphur dioxide, from overfishing - the list is long. The greatest single threat, of course, comes from oil pollution. Discounting ballast pollution and oil spillages we forecast that in excess of one and a half million metric tonnes of oil will pollute waters of the Persian the Gulf during the remainder of this decade.

Almost two thirds of all the petroleum carried by ships is exported from this region. According to one estimate the level of oil pollution in the waters of the Persian Gulf is 3.1 per cent of the global total - 47 times the average for a marine environment of comparable size.

Given this constant and massive movement in crude oil and petroleum products, accidents are inevitable. Following a meeting of experts from your region at the end of 1979 the process for establishing the Marine Emergency Mutual Aid Centre was started.

The setting up of the Centre in Bahrain early in 1983 could not have been more timely for it coincided with the Nowruz oil field blow out.

Dealing with the spill has been made exceptionally difficult, not only by the political situation, but also by the many conflicting reports from inside and outside of the region concerning its precise extent and nature. We now know, for example, that many of these reports, including one using satellite images, were deliberately distorted by unscrupulous business interests. Another complicating factor was that polluters, using the Norwuz spill as cover, took the opportunity to dump wastes into this region's waters.

Though there is some evidence from this region and elsewhere that the Nowruz oil pollution may be less damaging than was once thought, the spill has posed a significant threat to natural ecosystems, fisheries, coral reefs and to industrial installations with sea-water intakes, especially desalination plants. The Mutual Aid Centre in Bahrain, and ROPME as its parent organization, with the help and advice of national focal points and experts from the region, formulated a programme for dealing with the spill, its clean-up and its after effects. The expert consultative advice provided by the Centre and by your Regional Organization have paved the way for the efforts to deal with the aftermath of the spill.

Some of the wells have now been capped and the flow of crude oil has been substantially reduced. The countries of this region have a commendable record of foregoing political differences in order to co-operate on vitally important environmental issues, and all of us in UNEP, the Mutual Aid Centre, and the secretariat of ROPME hope that with a renewed spirit of co-operation, the flow can be completely stopped and that plans for remedial action can be put into effect. UNEP stands ready to assist in any way we can.

A number of projects have been drawn up in the framework of the action plan with participation and involvement of experts from Iran. They are in various stages of implementation. UNEP remained associated with ROPME and assists in the development of these projects by co-ordinating the input of various specialized agencies of the United Nations system. One of the project deals specifically with the fate of oil as pollutant in your region and another with the modelling of processes that may contribute to the transport of petroleum hydrocarbons by physical oceanic processes. As part of these projects two meetings of experts from your region have been held recently. A symposium was organized in co-operation with Saudia Arabia's University of Petroleum and Minerals in Dahrān (October 1983) on the subject of mathematical modelling of the oceanographic conditions of your region. Another symposium on the fate and fluxes of petroleum hydrocarbons was organized in co-operation with the University of Basrah (January 1984). Over half the papers presented were submitted by scientists from this region.

We attach great importance to your meeting as it will contribute to the better understanding of the oceanic processes relevant to your region, of the effect of oil pollution on marine life and of its impact on critical ecosystems. Oil, being the single most important potential pollutant in your region, deserves your special attention. Regardless of its source, once it enters the marine environment of your region, it may create serious problems by harming your valuable marine and coastal living resources and by impairing the quality of your coastal waters rendering them unsuitable for desalination and industrial use.

Consequently, we were pleased to be invited to your meeting and learn from the presentations we expect to hear about the specific problems facing your country. This will enable our organization to provide your Governments with a more appropriate advice and assistance, should such assistance be requested from UNEP.

Mr. Chairman, allow me to end this short intervention, delivered on behalf of Dr. Mostafa Tolba, with expression of our hope that your meeting will significantly contribute to the assessment and understanding of the impact of oil pollution in your region and to the solution of environmental problems faced by your region.

Personally, I would like to thank the organizers of this meeting for inviting me to Teheran, and my friends from Iran who have urged me to see this beautiful country and its people.

Thank you.