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HIGHLIGHTS OF THE FOURTH WORLD CONFERENCE ON WOMEN MONDAY, 4 SEPTEMBER 1995

Delegates to the Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) participated in two opening events on Monday, 4 September, the first day of the two week conference. The Government of the People's Republic of China hosted a welcoming ceremony at the Great Hall of the People during the morning. An opening Plenary was held during the afternoon in the Beijing International Convention Center (BICC). The Plenary was opened with a statement from Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General, Ismat Kittani, followed by a statement by Chen Muhua, Vice Chairperson of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress of the PRC and the newly elected President of the Conference. Chen also presided over the adoption of a number of procedural items. Gertrude Mongella, Secretary-General of the FWCW, then spoke, after which the Plenary began to hear statements under Agenda Item 8, General Exchange of Views.

OPENING PLENARY

On behalf of UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, who was too ill to attend the meeting, Special Representative of the Secretary-General, Ismat Kittani, opened the FWCW and presented a message from Boutros-Ghali. He noted that the Conference cements a new era in relations between the UN and China. He identified a number of stages over the past 50 years in the UN's work to ensure the rights of women, which began with efforts to build a legal basis for equality, then recognized the importance of development in achieving the advancement of women, and has led to the current continuum of world conferences and efforts to define a new global agenda.

Chen Muhua, Vice Chairperson of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress of the PRC, was then elected President of the Conference. She invited participants to seek a common ground and a solid commitment in Beijing, which would translate into action. She then opened consideration of the agenda and called delegates' attention to the recommendations of the pre-conference consultations (A/CONF.177/L.4). Delegates proceeded to adopt the rules of procedure (A/CONF.177/2) and

the agenda (A/CONF.177/1). Under the agenda item regarding election of officers other than President, delegates elected: the candidates for Vice-President from the five regional groups; Li Zhaoxing, Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs of the PRC, as Vice President *ex officio*; Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah (Namibia), as Rapporteur-General; and Patricia Licuanan (Philippines) as Chair of the Main Committee. In addition, the Main Committee was established, the members of the Credentials Committee were appointed, and the report of the Conference was adopted.

Gertrude Mongella, Secretary-General of the Conference, stressed the need to look at women's issues holistically. Delegates should consider the cross-cutting nature of women's issues and the fact that women fare badly when compared to men in many areas, including poverty, literacy, education, health, economic concerns, politics and human rights. She also noted that development issues are inseparable from women's issues, called on the FWCW to elicit commitments to action and resources both nationally and internationally, and declared that the issue of peace must be addressed to improve the status of women.

Mohtarma Benazir Bhutto, Prime Minister of Pakistan, stressed that social prejudices, not religion, deny women their rightful place in many societies. She noted that: the Islamic world has three female prime ministers; Pakistan has hosted a conference of women parliamentarians from the Islamic world; men outnumber women in 15 Asian nations; the girl child remains vulnerable because of prejudice; and some traditional customs are harmful to women. She also stressed the need to distinguish between Islamic teachings and social taboos, and elaborated on women's rights in Islam. Some of Pakistan's initiatives to improve the status of women include: a public awareness campaign through the mass media to alert women to the fact that domestic violence is a crime punishable by law; a focus on education for girls, training women teachers, and opening avenues for opportunity and financial independence for women; the establishment of a women's bank to help them achieve financial independence; and the establishment of programs to train women health workers. She noted that Pakistan signed the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Violence against Women last month. The Platform should address the issues of new and additional resources and self

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determination of territories under alien domination. She also called for stronger text on the role of the traditional family.

Vigdis Finnbogadottir, President of Iceland, stressed the need to determine the reasons why women's issues are marginalized in many countries and how these can be eliminated. She called for a Platform containing concrete proposals and political will from governments. Resources are not prerequisites for action and their lack should not be used as an excuse for inaction. She also noted that the UN Charter is committed to addressing sources of conflict through human rights and that there is a relationship between peace and the equal rights of women and men.

The Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Begum Khaleda Zia, reviewed progress after the first three UN conferences on women and identified a number of persistent problems, highlighting violence against women in Bosnia. Three factors are crucial to the advancement of women: recognition that women's participation in eradicating poverty and charting a sustainable and peaceful future is an investment; a new relationship between men and women must be affirmed and supported by governments and citizens; and everything possible must be done to sustain awareness of the role of women. She proposed: the creation of a UN post of Deputy Secretary-General on Women's Affairs, to be responsible for coordination of all women's programmes throughout the UN system and implementation of the Platform; a High Level UN commission of eminent women to facilitate the implementation of the Platform and related UN activities; and an annual award for "Woman of the Year" chosen by a panel to include the FWCW Secretary-General.

The Vice-President and Minister of Gender and Community Development in Uganda, Dr. Speciosa Wandira Kazibwe, said new global responsibilities for individuals and states have been defined and re-defined, with women playing an increasing role in debates. Nothing short of redress of the gender imbalance will bring about people-centered sustainable development. She reviewed Uganda's achievements in advancing the status of women, notably the appointment of six female government ministers. She offered herself as ready proof of the effectiveness of affirmative action. Uganda is working towards a critical mass of women to effect change at all levels. She called for new finance to improve functional literacy in the developing world, with guarantees of education for the girl-child, and advocated affirmative action in support of disabled women and members of religious and ethnic minorities.

The Vice-President of Viet Nam, Nguyen Thi Binh, said the final world gathering of women in the 20th century should chart a course to a more peaceful and prosperous world. Recalling her country's experience of war, she paid tribute to the endurance and resourcefulness of Vietnamese women. They are now participants in and agents of a new era of development. She noted the catalytic and exponential value of education, especially for girls, and called on the international community to support the universal right to education.

IN THE CORRIDORS I

Conference resource problems have preoccupied delegations during the opening days. Both the United States and the G77/China have requested additional translation facilities and interpreters for regional meetings and contact groups. The US has also questioned the overall level of resources dedicated to the Conference by the UN, given the importance of the event and the

issues. Specifically, the US has questioned the lack of bus services to and from the NGO Forum at Huairou.

IN THE CORRIDORS II

Delegates at the G77/China regional meetings have been dealing with some of the most controversial issues expected to re-emerge during the Conference, including reproductive rights and the use of the terms "gender," "equality" and "equity" in the draft Platform for Action. Attempts to reach a consensus are being hampered by a number of factors including differences of opinion between delegates who reached agreement at earlier negotiations in New York and senior colleagues who have arrived from national capitals for the FWCW. The new Chair of the G77/China, Senator Leticia Ramos Shahani (Philippines), who acted as Secretary General of the Nairobi Conference, is expected to lead a strong call for new and additional UN resources to support implementation of the Platform for Action, including new finance for the lead UN agencies on women's issues, UNIFEM and INSTRAW.

IN THE CORRIDORS III

As the conference begins, participants are thinking ahead and considering their desired outcome. Many of the delegates' definitions of a successful conference have focused on the draft Declaration and Platform for Action, the most visible outcome of the Conference. One basic benchmark for success is agreement on a consensus document. Others are looking for specific language in the text, for example, reflecting commitments made in other relevant UN agreements. Some have focused instead on Australia's "Conference of Commitments" proposal, and will pay close attention to the Plenary statements. Still others have taken a broader perspective, and focus on the significance of the FWCW in defining the role of women in the 21st century, and the degree to which the Conference will affirm and advance the notion of equality of women.

THINGS TO LOOK FOR TODAY

PLENARY: The Plenary will continue to hear statements under Agenda Item 8, General Exchange of Views, in Convention Hall No. 1 of the BICC during morning and afternoon sessions. The UN Journal contains a list of speakers.

MAIN COMMITTEE: The Main Committee is scheduled to meet during the morning and afternoon in Convention Hall No. 16, to discuss the organization of work, the draft Platform for Action (A/CONF.177/L.1), the report of the contact group on gender (A/CONF.177/L.2), and the report of the informal consultations (A/CONF.177/L.3). Immediately following adjournment, Working Groups I and II will convene.

WORKING GROUP I: The Working Group is expected to meet in Convention Hall No. 16. The closed meeting is expected to consider Chapter IV, Section C (Health) during a morning session and Chapter V (Institutional Arrangements) during an afternoon session.

WORKING GROUP II: The Working Group is expected to meet in closed sessions in Convention Hall No. 10 during a morning session and Convention Hall No. 15 during an afternoon session. During the morning, it is expected to consider Chapter IV, Section I (Human Rights), and during the afternoon, it is expected to continue consideration of Section I and also consider the chapeau of Chapter IV (Strategic Objectives and Actions).