



**Adelphi Research  
Institute for Environmental Security  
The Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment**

***Forum & Exhibition on Environment, Conflict and Cooperation***

The Hague, 7 March 2006

**Speech by  
State Secretary Pieter van Geel**

**Welcome**

Ladies and gentlemen,

It's good that people from so many different fields have come together to exchange views on environment, conflict and cooperation. Where do environment, security and sustainable development meet? What can policymakers, politicians and scientists do with that knowledge? Quite a lot, I would say. But I shall return to that later.

**Introduction**

- I am here to represent the entire government. Responsibility for the environment, security and sustainable development is shared by the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Defence and, of course, Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment.
- These issues touch on the action plan drafted at the WSSD in Johannesburg. I have promoted this action plan both at home and abroad.
- Why is the issue of environment, conflict and cooperation so important? Why do we need to make this complex issue visible and concrete?
- The panels we will be viewing in a moment are on a tour through Europe – from Germany and the United Kingdom to Switzerland and Slovakia. They show very clearly how changes caused by human action threaten the environment and cause human insecurity. And how the scarcity and overexploitation of natural resources can lead to violent conflict. This exhibition also demonstrates the vital importance of sustainable development as a framework for stability and peace.

**Environment, peace and conflict**

- The role of natural resources in areas of conflict and crisis is both clear and highly complex. Water wars, blood diamonds, warlords, and the use of resource wealth to fund

corrupt regimes and civil war - all are clear evidence of the many intricate relationships between environment, security and cooperation.

- Pollution, depletion of natural resources and rapid changes to coastlines, wetlands, watersheds and forests have a dramatic impact on the communities that depend on them. Take Bangladesh, for example. Faced with more frequent flooding, people are being forced to migrate from the deltas where they used to eke out a living.
- A less immediate, but no less radical connection between the human impact on the environment and human tragedies is climate change. Only now are we beginning to feel its effects. Yet we can safely say that it is systematically changing risk potential. The increase of extreme weather events may well fuel more low-level conflicts, and raise their intensity.
- However, the peacemaking potential of environmental policy and sustainable development has remained untapped. Klaus Töpfer, the Executive Director of the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP), referred to this when he said that 'environmental security is the disarmament policy of the future'.

### **Peace and the Environment**

- While environmental degradation can trigger conflict and violence, environmental cooperation can serve as a peacemaking tool. The reasons are as follows.
- The environment lends itself – perhaps more than any other theme – to peacebuilding and peacekeeping. To solve environmental problems, we need to look beyond national political borders, take a long-term view and encourage local and civil society participation. Environmental problems overshadow other, conflicting economic issues.
- Cross-border environmental cooperation is often difficult to achieve, whether the borders are political, cultural, economic or social. But where it takes root its effects are usually positive. Parties learn to trust each other and to work together. Regional identities emerge around shared resources. Mutual rights are recognised and prospects improve.
- Forests, rivers and wetlands straddle borders. People on either side depend on each other's treatment of these resources. This is especially true of rivers. Countries upstream have an impact on their downstream neighbours, making people interdependent. It is therefore very important to work together on river basin management. This is most certainly the case for the Netherlands, which has been a member of the International Rhine Commission since 1950.
- Environmental peacemaking calls for cooperation, since its starting point is the management of natural resources. It leads to more security and more peaceful relations between disputing parties. The recent success of a project on joint water resources and rivers in the Southern Caucasus is a case in point. A growing array of initiatives all over

the world – including peace parks, joint river basin management plans, regional maritime agreements and joint environmental monitoring programmes – are combining ecology and politics to achieve peace. As such initiatives spread and gain momentum, they can transform our view of both conflict and the environment.

### **What is the Netherlands doing?**

- The Dutch government is very much in favour of integrating environmental, security and development policies. Let me give you some examples of our activities.
- First, we support the Environment and Security Initiative – ENVSEC. This joint initiative of UNEP, UNDP, OSCE and NATO assesses and develops projects combining environmental and security concerns in Southeast Europe, Central Asia and the Caucasus;
- Second, we support the Institute for Environmental Security in The Hague. It recently published the results of its three Prototype EnviroSecurity Assessments, focusing on the Colombian Guiana Shield Region, the Great Lakes region of Africa, and Kalimantan in Indonesia.
- In many areas, the Netherlands is trying to prevent conflict arising over water distribution. That is why we support the Nile Basin Initiative, which involves all the countries in the Nile river basin. This initiative plays an important role in conflict prevention and promotes economic growth through better water management. It has also led to regional cooperation in other fields – like agriculture, the environment and energy. The Netherlands is supporting similar partnerships for the Mekong, the Limpopo and the Ganges.
- We have also developed a programme in the Great Lakes Region of Central Africa. The aim is to bring peace and stability through the sustainable development of natural resources. The focus will be on the central areas of the Great Lakes Region, since they are home to abundant natural resources, but also scenes of conflict and poverty. We can contribute to stability in this part of the world by means of confidence building through regional cooperation. We can increase the peace dividend through sustainable development and reduce conflict through natural resource management and control. The aims are:
  - 1) to enhance ecological security in regions where poverty reduction is the first priority
  - 2) to support the Burundian authorities in protecting unique nature areas and habitats, especially the ecosystems in parks
  - 3) to enhance security by combating illegal trade and promoting sustainable use of natural resources – in the Congo basin, for instance.

**Conclusion**

- I should like to thank the Institute for Environmental Security and Adelphi for organising this exhibition and forum, and the members of the panel for taking part in a hopefully fruitful debate.
- I sincerely hope that this forum, and especially the exhibition, will help to improve communication between the government, NGOs and academia.
- I should like to end by quoting Wangari Maathai, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004 for her work as an environmental activist in Kenya:

'If we did a better job of managing our resources sustainably, conflicts over them would be reduced. Protecting the global environment is directly related to securing peace.'

Thank you.