

**SPEECH BY COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF FIDEL CASTRO AT THE
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Excellencies,

World Health Organization officials,

Distinguished delegates,

The World Health Organization deserves honor because together with UNICEF it has assisted in saving the lives of hundreds of millions of children and millions of mothers, and it has relieved the suffering of, and saved from death, many more millions of human beings! These two agencies together with FAO, UNDP, UNCTAD, the WFP, the World Population Fund, UNESCO and others - so resisted by those who would like to obliterate from Earth the noble ideas that inspired the establishment of the United Nations - have decidedly contributed to the creation of a universal awareness on the grave problems affecting the world today and the great challenges still ahead.

If the world economy has grown six times, according to estimates by prestigious analysts, and the production of goods and services has climbed from less than 5 trillion dollars to over 29 trillion between 1950 and 1997, why do 12 million children under 5 years of age still die every year, that is, 33 thousand a day when the overwhelming majority could be saved? Nowhere in the world, neither in genocide nor war are so many people killed by the minute, by the hour, by the day as are killed by hunger and poverty in our planet, 53 years after the United Nations was founded.

Almost a hundred percent of the dying children whose lives could be saved are poor and among those who survive, why are 500 thousand blinded every year for lack of a simple vitamin whose cost, in a year, is lower than a packet of cigarettes? Why are 200 million children under 5 years of age undernourished? Why do 250 million children and adolescents work? Why is it that 110 million do not attend grammar school and 275 million fail to attend junior high school? Why are 2 million girls dragged to prostitution every year?

Why is it that in a world producing almost 30 trillion dollars a year in goods and services, 1.3 billion human beings live in absolute poverty? Why are they receiving less than a dollar a day per capita when others receive over a million dollars daily? Why is it that 800 million people cannot have access to the most basic health services? Why is it that of the 50 million people, children and adults, who die in the world every year 17 million - that is, about 50 thousand a day - are the victims of mostly curable infectious diseases, many of them preventable, at a cost sometimes lower than a dollar?

What is the price of a human life? This unfair and unbearable economic order that prevails in the world, how much is it costing mankind?

Five hundred and eighty five thousand women died in 1996 during pregnancy or delivery, over 99 percent of them in the Third World; 70 thousand died of abortions performed in unsuitable conditions, 69 thousand of them in Latin America, Africa and Asia.

Aside from the vast difference in the quality of life, people in the rich countries live, as an average, 12 more years than in the poor countries and in certain nations the difference between the richest and the poorest is 20 to 35 years.

It's really sad to see that despite efforts by the WHO and UNICEF in the last 50 years, only in the mother-child segment of the population over 600 million children and 25 million mothers who could have survived were dead for lack of medical care. But, that would have required a more rational world with more justice. In that same post-war period over 30 trillion dollars were invested in the military field. According to United Nations estimates, the cost of universal access to basic health care services would be 25 billion dollars a year, that is, 3 percent of the 800 billion dollars presently destined for military expenses. And the cold war is over.

The arms trade - arms for killing - goes on while medicines, that should be made to save lives, are sold at increasingly higher prices. In 1995, the market of pharmaceuticals involved 280 billion dollars. The developed countries with 824 million people, 14.6 percent of the world population, consume 82 percent of the medicines while consumption in the rest of the world with a 4,815 million population is only 18 percent. The prices are actually prohibitive for the Third World where consumption is limited to the privileged sectors. The control of patents and markets by the big transnational companies allows them to raise prices over ten times above production costs. The market price of some advanced antibiotics is 50 times higher than their cost.

But mankind continues to grow. We are already close to 6 billion. We are growing at a pace of 80 millions annually. It took 2 million years to grow to the first billion people; 100 years to the second billion; 11 years to the last few billions. In 50 more years there will be 4 billion new people on the planet.

Old diseases are reemerging and new ones are coming up: AIDS, ebola, hantavirus, bovine spongiform encephalopathy, over 30 of them according to experts. Either we defeat AIDS or AIDS will ruin many Third World countries. No poor patient can afford the 10,000 dollars cost, per person per year, of the existing treatments that prolong life but do not cure the disease.

The climate is changing, the oceans and the atmosphere are warmer, the air and waters are contaminated, the soils keep eroding, the deserts are expanding, the forests are dying, water is in short supply. Who will save our species? Perhaps the blind and uncontrollable market laws, the neo-liberalization going global, an economy growing by itself and for itself as a cancer devouring man and destroying nature? That cannot be the way, or it will only be for a very short period of history.

It is against such realities that the World Health Organization is heroically fighting and it is, indeed, its duty to be optimistic.

As a Cuban and a revolutionary I share that optimism. Cuba, with an infant mortality rate of 7.2 per one thousand live-births in the first year of life, a physician to 176 people - the highest ratio in the world - and a life expectancy beyond 75 years, reached in 1983 the goals set by the Health for All Program in the Year 2000, despite the cruel blockade it has been enduring for over 40 years and its condition as a poor Third World country.

The attempt to carry out a genocide against our people has led to the multiplication of our strengths and our will to survive. The world can also fight and win!

Thank you very much.

(VERSIONES TAQUIGRÁFICAS - CONSEJO DE ESTADO)

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