

The Nineteenth Session of the Commission on Sustainable Development May 2 – 13 2011

Fr. Seán McDonagh, SSC

The 19th session of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development opened on May 2, 2011 and will continue until May 13th 2011. The word “sustainability” became part of the vocabulary of many missionaries and development workers in the wake of the publication of deliberations of the UN Commission on Environment and Development in a book called “Our Common Future.” The book is often called *the Brundtland Report* after the name of the Chair of the Committee, Gro Harlem Brundtland who was Prime Minister of 1990 to 1996. In a nutshell, Sustainable Development means meeting the needs of this generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

The Commission on Sustainable Development emerged from Agenda 21, the programme for action for sustainable development adopted in June 1992 by the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) also known as the “Rio Earth Summit.” Agenda 21 called for the creation of the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD), to ensure an effective follow-up of the UNCED. The CSD has 53 member states.

The CSD held its first substantive session in June 1993 and has convened every year since then at the UN Headquarters in New York. In the five years after 1993, the CSD systematically reviewed the implementation of all chapters of the Agenda 21.

One of the most significant meetings of the CSD took place in Johannesburg, South Africa in September 2002.

The 19th session of the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD-19) was opened by H.E. Mr. Laszlo Borbely, Minister of Environment and Forest of Romania. He reminded the participants that CSD-19 is a policy session. Therefore, it needs to make policy decisions and to identify concrete measures to advance, in an integrated manner the implementation of the agenda on a

number of thematic issues. These include, transport, chemicals, waste management, mining and the ten-year framework on sustainable consumption and production patterns.

He pointed out that the growing transport challenges, especially for those living in economically poor countries, is urgent.

The management of chemicals has important implications for achieving the Millennium Development Goals. He stated that the chemical industry contributes to job creation, improved living standards, eradication of poverty, and improved health of humans, agricultural productivity and energy efficiency. While he cautioned that sound management of chemicals is needed to prevent adverse consequences for the environment and human health, he failed to mention that many chemical companies are economically more powerful than the majority of nation states. Chemical company use this power to ensure that the vast majority of chemicals are not tested for their carcinogenic, endocrine blocking or immune compromising characteristics.

His comments on mining were equally bland and uncritical. The goal of mining, according to him was to “maximise” the positive economical impact of mining while minimizing its negative environmental and social impacts, and reinforcing the capacity of producing countries to benefit from their natural resources in the long term.” He called for “a holistic approach with mining integrated in the sustainable development paradigm.”

I was one of the speakers of a side-event entitled, “Human Rights, The Environment and Mining: Perspectives from Peru,” organised by the Maryknoll Missionary Sisters. Among the speakers was Trinidad Carlos Serna, a Human Rights Lawyer from Peru. She told a very different story about the abuses of human and environmental rights which was facilitated by the Peruvian Government.

I shared my own research of pollution at La Oroya, a mining and smelting city in the Peruvian Andes, which is one of the 10 most polluted cities in the world.

((Cf. www.blacksmithinstitute.org/wwpp2007/finalReport2007.pdf The full report can be found at www.worstpolluted.com).

Independent researchers found that ***Lead levels*** in children 6 months to 6 yrs: 3x above the concentration set by WHO; for three in every ten children in the old city of La Oroya, the concentration was often six and seven times above the WHO limits.

Cadmium: Nearly all the participants from La Oroya, had three times more cadmium in their blood than the average US citizen. Cadmium is a toxic element which can cause kidney problems, loss of bone density, lung cancer and prostate cancer in men.

Arsenic concentration in La Oroya, exceeded the amount found in an average U.S. sample.

Mercury levels in the blood in La Oroya were found to be three times the level of the average US sample.

Caesium in both places was four times the average US amount

Antimony: La Oroya had more than 30 times the amount in comparison with the average US citizen.

Mr. Laszlo Borbely seemed to be unaware or unwilling to address any of these issues about international mining corporations which are replicated in many countries in Asia, Central and Latin America and Africa. Not once in his talk or the subsequent presentations by Dr. Istvan Teplan, Senior Advisor of the Hungarian Secretary of State for the Environment, speaking on behalf of the European Union and its Members States, was there any serious statement about the power that mining corporations wield over both national governments and even groups such as the European Union.

As I said at the side-event on “Human Rights, the Environment and Mining: Perspectives from Peru,” it seemed at every speaker on the first day of the 19th Session of the Commission on Sustainable Development had taken an oath not

to mention the role that the military and corporations play in the pollution and impoverishment of our world today..

Such institutional amnesia does not augur well that the 19th Session of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development will deal effectively with the current ecological crisis.