STATEMENT AT THE WORKSHOP ON "PARTICIPATORY RESTORATION OF LAKE URMIA"

21 February 2016
Tehran, Iran

Gary Lewis
UN Resident Coordinator
and UNDP Resident Representative
Salam va Sobh Bekheir

Khanoom-ha va Aghayan

Man dar Sazman Melal dar Iran kar mikonom

Man kheili khoshhal hastam az inja amadan va didare shoma

Hala man mikoham chand kalameh bah shoma sohbat konam – vali bey englesi.

Dr. Fazeli,

Dr. Sa’adat,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I bid you all a very good morning.

I am very pleased to see such a high turnout for this event and to see so many of you from different ministries and segments of the society at this very important event.

I understand that we have – in the audience – representatives of local NGOs from Azerbaijan e Gharbi, as well as local community including farmers.

I understand that we also have representatives from Ministry of Energy, Ministry of Agriculture-Jihad, Ministry of Interior, Lake Urmia National Committee as well as representatives from the Department of Environment and provincial authorities.

Finally I understand that we have representatives from the universities here.

Colleagues,

This one-day session today started as an idea in the mind of Dr. Ashna some months ago when he and I first discussed the issue of environmental security in Iran.

And since we are gathered in the Centre for Strategic Studies, I would like to start the day with what I hope is a reflection of a ‘strategic’ nature.
I have been privileged to live and work in this beautiful country for three years, and I believe that it is possible for me – on behalf of the United Nations – to draw some conclusions about some of the human security threats that we face.

Much of what I have to say today relates to the issue of security – but I do not propose to discuss *amniyat* in the traditional sense of how most people understand it to be – terror, Da’esh and so forth – but from a different perspective.

When I look at the issue of security I see people’s faces. I see whether they have enough to eat. Whether they can breathe clean air. Whether they have enough water to drink. Whether they have secure jobs. That contributes to a person’s well-being and therefore their security.

And I believe that when most people think of the idea of security, they ask themselves “what makes me feel secure?”

In future, what will come to dominate much of our thinking on security will be the environment in which we live. And already our wellbeing – here in Iran – is being challenged by a number of things relating to the environment.

I am talking about:

1. Scarcity of water.
2. Deforestation and desertification of so much of the country.
3. Air and water pollution.
4. Sand and dust storms that blow from the west and come to pollute our air and damage our health, infrastructure and our economy.

Ladies and gentlemen I am afraid that I have even more bad news.

The climate change that is scientifically proven – and about which we are hearing a great deal – will come to the Middle East. It will have a very devastating impact over the next several years. In the near future, the evidence tells us that our region will become hotter and drier.

So we must focus on one essential ingredient in our thinking about human security. And that is water.

Water and controversy over water has the ability to create tension. Satellite assessments for the past decade have shown that the water in the basin which
contains Turkey, Syria, Iraq and western Iran – this water has decreased faster than in any other basin on the planet – except in the north of India.

I think that it is quite clear that this phenomenon has contributed to the increased tension and some of the clashes have taken place as a result of drought and shrinking aquifers in those countries that I have just named – with the single exception of western Iran.

But even here – within the boundaries of Iran – we are seeing a significant decrease in our water. In the Hamouns. In Isfahan and Khuzestan. In the villages and cities in the Central Iran where much water is over-pumped for agriculture, and of course in the area which we have gathered to discuss today – Lake Urmia.

I have been to all the above mentioned places and I was most disturbed by what I saw – especially in the Hamouns and in Lake Urmia. In the Hamouns I have seen the consequences of the drying up of the Herman River into the three main Hamoun lakes and what this has meant for villagers and fishermen in those places.

What I have seen in the Hamouns is the utter devastation of the livelihoods of the hundreds of thousands people. Thousands of residents have left both the Hamouns and Lake Urmia as a result of what is happening.

So ladies and gentlemen, I believe that the United Nations and the colleagues gathered in this room today are here for a reason. And that is to learn from the past. To learn from what we have done right – and what we have done wrong.

I think there is a consensus in this country now that the old style of development planning with construction of heavy industry, massive agricultural products or water management and hyperactive digging in wells has damaged our environment and has damaged in Lake Urmia.

The United Nations Development Programme is here today at the request of Dr. Ashna and Dr. Fazeli to share with you some of what we have found in our work during the past several years in Lake Urmia.

Dr. Nazaridoust and some of our colleagues who are here today from the project will share with you – in greater detail – what has happened, but I would like to summarize in a few points what I believe has happened in recent months and years in Lake Urmia.
We are trying to conserve water and allow the saved water to flow back into the lake. We have worked with many partners. We have worked with the Department of Environment and communities at the local level. We have worked with the East and West Azerbaijan Governments and the Ministry of Agriculture-Jihad. We have worked to introduce new techniques that use less water and fewer chemicals and yet yields higher yields of agricultural products.

We have tried to up-scale this to a larger number of farming communities in the Lake Urmia basin. We have received funding support – in addition to what the government has provided – from the Government of Japan.

As a result this initiative now covers about 10 per cent of Lake Urmia basin. And today we would like to discuss some of what we have learned for your consideration and possible application elsewhere in the basin and across Iran.

Let us learn from these lessons and apply them – where possible – elsewhere in Iran.

I would like to conclude by thanking the Centre for Strategic Studies for inviting us here today and I would like to take this opportunity to praise the people who have been working on the ground in Lake Urmia – especially the project team. I would like to recognize the valuable efforts and activities being implemented by the Lake Urmia Committee led by Dr. Kalantari and his team under the direct supervision of the president himself as well as the First Vice-President, Mr. Jahangiri.

Dr. Fazeli, colleagues, the United Nations Development Programme has been in Iran since the year 1966 and we remain here to support the development efforts of the citizens and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Iran is a valued and respected member of the United Nations and we are doing our job to help provide for the human security of the people of Iran.

Thank you for joining us this morning.

*Sepas gozaram.*