Speech by Dr. Oscar Arias  
Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI)  
Indianapolis, Indiana  
September 26, 2002  
*Global Justice and Health in the 21st Century*

Good morning. It is an honor and a pleasure to be here with you today.

Sixty-three years ago this month, Germany invaded Poland, marking the beginning of World War II. It was the bloodiest conflict in the history of humankind, and it came to an end less than sixty years ago, during many of our lifetimes. Let us hope that we never revert to violence on such a large scale again.

Fifty-four years ago this month, the UN’s World Health Organization was formed. The creation of the WHO reflected the belief that health is a global concern and that we must work together to improve the well-being of people in all corners of the Earth. Let us hope that the valuable work of the WHO continues to receive the support it deserves, and that each day we move a step closer to our goal of a healthier, more peaceful world.

Forty years ago this month, the UN announced that the Earth’s population had reached 3 billion people. Today that number has more than doubled and world population growth shows no sign of letting up. Let us hope that in the years to come our planet’s governments can provide for all and that no one will be left behind.

I would like to place my remarks this morning in the broader context of a topic that I just mentioned: the world’s increasing population. Last year the United Nations released its most recent projected population figures for the year 2050. These projections confront us with a startling reality, and I believe that it is worthwhile to reflect on it for a moment. Currently, 1.2 billion people live in the developed world, and 4.9 billion in the developing world. By 2050, the number of people living in developed countries is expected to hold steady, while the number living in developing countries primarily in Africa, Asia, and Latin America is expected to increase to 8.2 billion. Populations in Europe and Japan, and to a lesser extent the U.S., are growing older, and in some cases even shrinking. In the developing world, on the other hand, despite severe poverty, the AIDS epidemic, and armed conflict, populations are exploding.

These facts must be taken quite seriously by anyone who is concerned with human wellbeing. While we must recognize that projections are not the same as predictions, there is good cause to believe that population trends will indeed follow what the UN projects, unless there is a major change in the world’s priorities, especially when it comes to sharing the wealth of education and health with the developing world. For these have been kept for far too long as first-world treasures, systematically refused to the world’s poor. If the world does not change its course, wealthy countries will reap what they have sown the day they find themselves unable to build a wall tall enough to keep out the problems of those poor they have steadfastly neglected. Within fifty years, the population of the poor countries will be almost seven times that of the rich countries. As poverty needs no passport to travel, it is time for the wealthy countries to wake up. Former British Prime Minister Clement Attlee once said, “We cannot survive if we create a paradise within our frontiers, and tolerate an
infemo outside them.” And yet, that is exactly what the developed countries have been doing for centuries. The industrialized countries are prospering while putting up walls to keep out immigration and creating trade barriers to keep out the exports of poor countries. But walls alone are not enough to keep out the desperate men and women who live in the inferno.

It is not simply out of fear that we must all pay attention to the needs of the developing world. It is a question of justice and human dignity. Would anyone dare to say that children who happen to be born in South Africa or India or Nicaragua deserve to suffer poverty and deprivation while those lucky enough to be born in wealthy northern countries deserve privileges and advantages? Would anyone here subscribe to the statement that an American child’s life is worth more than that of a Sudanese child? And yet by our actions— and especially by our lack of action—we continue to perpetuate a world situation in which these statements, no matter how we deny them, translate into reality.

One of the ways in which we perpetuate these attitudes and attempt to protect our privileges is through immigration policy. Rather than fostering xenophobia and spending hundreds of millions of dollars on border police, the developed countries should be welcoming immigrants and assisting them to make the transition into their new home. For it has been widely demonstrated that immigrants contribute far more than they cost, in economic terms, and the cultural contributions of generations of immigrants make for an ever-stronger and more vibrant society. The United States could never have become the world power that it is today without the successive waves of immigration that formed its work force, its politics, its academics, and its rich cultural life. European societies, too, are products of migration after migration through the continent, alternating between Celts and Goths to the north, and Arabs and Carthaginians to the South. It is both pointless and incorrect to attempt to draw a line to separate today’s migratory activity from that which has been going on since the dawn of history. The society which closes itself off to the influence of outsiders atrophies and dies, while that which remains open to new ideas, people, and customs, thrives.

In today’s globalized world, what developing countries need more than anything else is access to the markets of wealthy nations. Although virtually all leaders of industrialized countries profess to believe in free trade, most often what they are looking for is the opening of other countries’ markets, not their own. Today, industrialized countries provide more than $370 billion dollars per year—that is, more than one billion dollars per day—in different kinds of subsidies to their own farmers, while spending only about $50 billion dollars per year on foreign aid. The creation of the WTO was meant to foster freer trade, but until such first-world protectionism is ended, free trade will not live up to its promise for poor countries. The fact is, farmers in the developing world could compete with their counterparts in industrialized countries, but they cannot compete with those countries’ finance ministries. The leaders of wealthy countries with large domestic markets must understand that we, in the developing world, depend on trade for our survival. We must export or die, and if we cannot export our goods, we will have no option but to continue exporting our people.

Migration to wealthy countries must not be the only, or even the primary, answer to poverty in the developing world. It is not an easy decision nor a painless process to leave one’s homeland behind, however troubled that land may be. As we all know, most migrants, if they were afforded opportunities to get a good education and make a decent living in their home countries, would stay there. At least three things must be done in order to ensure the
poor opportunities to live dignified lives in the places they call home. First, armed conflicts must be ended, and energy and creativity must be put into preventing future conflicts from erupting. Second, the governments of developing countries must rearrange their priorities and invest heavily in the health and education of their people, instead of investing in the build-up of their armed forces. Indeed, the entire global arms trade must be subjected to scrutiny and controls of some kind. And finally, people like yourselves must put your skills and intelligence at the service of humanity, and in particular, the world’s poor.

What kind of world is this one that we are living in today? It is a world of injustice, in which each of the 500 richest individuals holds more than one billion dollars in assets, while 1.2 billion people survive on less than one dollar per day. It is a world of war and conflict, in which total military spending equals fourteen times the amount the governments of the industrialized nations spend on foreign aid for development. It is a world of unthinking consumption and destruction, in which 12% of known species are threatened with extinction, and worldwide reserves of oil and natural gas could run out in the next fifty years. It is a world of prejudice, fear and intolerance, where many children are taught to hate their peers of another race, religion or ethnicity. It is a world in which greed trumps solidarity and cynicism often clouds out hope. It is a world, my friends, in which a generation of African children are growing up orphans and a generation of North American children are growing up isolated from their neighbors and even from their families, with no concept or experience of community.

If this scenario brings tears to your eyes, I do not blame you. If you feel angry, this is justified, but acting out of anger and sadness will not heal this broken world. It is only with hope, with friendship, with solidarity, with tolerance and with love that we can save this planet from ourselves. Fortunately, there are many people around the world that work to hold up these positive values. It is because of these individuals, including yourselves, that it is possible to imagine a future worthy of this beautiful planet and all of the life upon it. As Victor Hugo tells us, this future has many names: “for the weak, it is the unreachable; for the timid, it is the unknowable; for the brave, it is an opportunity.”

Unfortunately, there is a great deal of resistance among world leaders, and particularly the religious leaders who continue to hold sway in many poor countries, to acknowledge the perils of unrestrained population growth, and to advocate for sensible ways to control it. Providing quality education to girls and women should be a top priority. It has been shown repeatedly that where women’s educational levels are high, fertility rates tend to decline and stabilize. When women are empowered to control their own destinies, and provided with the tools to go through life on equal footing with men, the results are smaller and healthier families, which translate into more equitable and sustainable societies for tomorrow. Remember that if you educate a man, you educate a man. but if you educate a woman, you educate a family.

Deplorably, the world is stuck in a pattern of ignoring children, and the parents who procreate them, in the most extreme conditions of deprivation. Instead of educating all children to prepare them for the twenty-first century, we are sending them back to the nineteenth century, condemning them to be poor laborers as their grandparents and great-grandparents were. Or, worse yet, we allow them to be converted into children of war: co-opted by unscrupulous guerrillas and irresponsible governments, to be served up as sacrificial lambs on the front lines of the senseless conflicts that continue to plague so many
desperate societies.

All people have a right to live in peace. At the same time, the poor cannot eat peace, anymore than they can eat rifles and grenades. In addition to committing top~, the world’s governments must truly commit to meeting their people’s most basic needs. Yet the leaders of some of the world’s poorest countries, those entrusted with, and most responsible for, the well-being of the poor, are committing an unspeakable crime by making the size of their militaries a higher priority than the well-being of their people. Every dollar that is spent on unnecessary weapons represents a missed opportunity to improve the life of a person in need of food, shelter, education, or health care. In the world there are billions of such people, and I can assure you that they are not interested in attack helicopters or fighter jets.

In order to give a picture of the relative priority of military spending in the economy of each country, the United Nations Human Development Program reports military expenditure as a percentage of gross domestic product. The same is done for education and health care. These numbers are extremely telling, in terms of the connection between military spending and human development, or the lack thereof.

The twenty countries with the highest human development indices spend an average of 3.5 times more on education than on their militaries, and four times more on health than on their militaries. The results are evident; these are the countries with the highest life expectancies, literacy rates, and GDP per capita. These are also the countries whose population size has stabilized, and even begun to shrink.

And what do we find in those countries whose human development levels are lower? Sadly, many of the world’s poorest governments spend more on their militaries than they do on health care, and in countries like Pakistan, Myanmar, Burundi, and Oman, military spending tops that for health and education combined. And what is military spending buying in these countries? Governments build up supplies of tanks and weapons to defend people who are dying in the streets and in overcrowded hospitals from hunger, malnutrition, and preventable diseases. Instead of going to school and paving a path to a brighter future, children learn how to shoot rifles and steal. Whole generations are growing up with no possibilities for legitimate employment, but plenty of opportunities to run drugs and guns. Instead of investing in university education, these governments condemn their growing populations to poverty for the sake of having a state-of-the-art air force.

To eventually bring the population figures of the developing world under control, and to ensure a dignified life for all of its people, investment in health care is critical. Long-overdue transfers of medical technology to the developing world could quickly add years to life span and vastly improve quality of life. This would be both an expression of global justice, and a way of giving poor people hope for the future, perhaps lowering their reliance on numerous children as insurance against ill health and unemployment. I do not need to convince you of the importance of health care in the developing world. I would just like to point out that we could be a lot further along the right road than we are today, if we learned to make human security our goal rather than a militaristic focus on national interests.

What is needed today is a new Marshall Plan for the world’s poor. From 1948 to 1951 the United States spent thirteen billion dollars to rebuild Europe after the war. What would it take to get governments not only that of the U.S., but of all the well-off industrialized
nations to commit to a similar plan to~y, in order to rebuild the world’s poorest countries, which have been devastated by centuries of colonialism, natural disasters, armed conflicts and poor governance? We know that redirecting just 5% of what the world spends on weapons and soldiers over ten years would be sufficient to guarantee basic education, health care and nutrition, potable water, and sanitation to all of the world’s people. I propose that the countries of the O.E.C.D., or the G4, plus some others, redirect a small percentage of their defense spending for the defense of the world’s poor. We know that redirecting just 5% of what the world spends on weapons and soldiers over ten years would be sufficient to guarantee basic education, health care and nutrition, potable water, and sanitation to all of the world’s people. If we focused only on funding a mandatory minimum of nine years of education in every country, that percentage would be even less. How quickly the great powers muster the political and financial will to bail out failing economies, but how slow we have been to act stamp out illiteracy, disease, and hunger. The resources are there, what is lacking is the sense of solidarity.

As individuals, I ask you to pay heed to your highest ideals, and do not let them remain only ideals. Instead, transform your helping instinct into action. Open dialogues with policy makers and politicians. Visit developing countries, read the news reports, allow yourselves to be aware of people’s suffering. Do not be discouraged. There is much to be done, but there are also many of us to do the work. What is important is that each person take part of it. When we recognize that a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step, we are empowered to take that first step, however small or large it might be.

Bobby Kennedy once said, “Few will have the greatness to bend history itself; but each of us can work to change a small portion of events, and in the total of all those acts will be written the history of this generation.” Those words are as true today as they were in the 1960s, and I believe each of us can. and should –indeed must –work to make this world a better place. As we toil side-by-side, a certain conception of the world emerges as the goal we are striving toward. Let me describe my vision to you, for I am confident that you will share it, and that we can work together to make it a reality. The world that I envision, as we step into the twenty-first century, is a world with more solidarity and less individualism; more honesty and less hypocrisy; more transparency and less corruption; more faith and less cynicism; more compassion and less selfishness. In short, a world with more love.

My friend and fellow Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel has said, “The opposite of love is not hate, it is indifference.” Whatever you choose as your part in creating a better world, do not let yourselves fall into indifference. It is a great danger in our age, when we have so much information and so little energy to care. In the face of indifference, I implore you to let yourselves care, and to find a way –however small or large –to make your work or your studies serve the goals of global justice and health. Any positive action you take brings light and dispels darkness. The world needs all the illumination it can get, and you, my friends, are the sparks that will light our way to a better future.

Thank you.