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Statement by the State Secretary for Foreign Affairs, Mr. Hans Dahlgren  
The 7th Conference of Parliamentarians of the Arctic Region in Kiruna  
2 August 2006

Mr Speaker, Esteemed Parliamentarians, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour for me to represent my Foreign Minister, Mr. Jan Eliasson, at this important Conference. I know that he is sorry that he could not be here personally, but he has asked me to convey his best regards and his hope that you will have a productive Conference and that you will enjoy your time here in Kiruna.

It is of course an honour for Sweden to host the Conference of Parliamentarians of the Arctic Region. This is the first time that we have this privilege. And I want to pay a special tribute to the municipality of Kiruna for its hospitality. You know, Kiruna is not just our only true Arctic city. It is the largest city in the world, areawise. And as someone who spent part of his childhood here and went to school here, I can tell you that it is also one of the best places to grow up in.

Madame Chair,

As you all know, Sweden and the other Nordic countries, together with the Russian Federation, Canada and the United States, are the eight Arctic States. We are proud and pleased to belong to that exclusive club. And together with six organizations of indigenous peoples in the Arctic, we have formed the Arctic Council. This is a forum for promoting cooperation, coordination and interaction on Arctic issues of common interest and concern.

In our view, the Arctic Council has made significant progress over the past ten years. I would like to take this opportunity to commend the present Chair of the Arctic Council, Ambassador Ignatiev, and to tell him that we are very pleased to be working with his Government.

The eight Arctic States obviously have a particular responsibility for developments in this region. However, we are not the only countries that are interested in what happens in the Arctic. Five states are already Arctic Council observers, and more – like Spain – are interested in joining.

Madame Chair,

One particularly attractive part of the Arctic cooperation is that it is easy to identify its usefulness, also in very practical terms. One example, that engages so many people in all our countries, is the issue of climate change. Climate change is most profound and most visible in the Arctic region.

What happens here also has strong repercussions on the world's climate system. Climate change in the Arctic gives us an early warning of what is likely to happen in the rest of the world. This region, therefore, can switch on the alarm, earlier than others, when harmful developments pose serious threats.

We are now starting to hear some of those alarm bells going off. Release of methane from the wetlands in northern Sweden is increasing. That indicates changes in the flora and the fauna at the landscape level. Unique Arctic species may just disappear, as warming continues and vegetation zones move forward. And another signal, which I've experienced myself, earlier this year, during a visit to the Svalbard Island - much of the ice and the icebergs had disappeared. And the scientists have established that the ice is actually melting in the Arctic.

Melting ice from glaciers on land means rising sea levels worldwide, centimeter by centimeter, year after year. And melting sea ice means larger open waters. The classical white horizons of the North Pole may slowly but steadily change into the dark blue expanses of the Arctic Ocean. Such developments do indeed have profound effects.

In 2004, the Arctic Council released the Arctic Climate Impact Assessment. It is a comprehensive report, with documented scientific knowledge and indigenous observations of changes that are already taking place in the Arctic. It also has projections on what we can expect in the future, if action is not taken to drastically reduce emissions of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. That is not a future in which anyone of us would want to live.

As you understand, the Swedish Government is highly concerned about climate change in the Arctic, and about its impact on the global climate system. We try to work, as well as we can – at home, in the EU and at the global level - to build consensus on the actions required. We need both to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases, and to facilitate adaptation. We hope that the Arctic Council will continue its pioneering work and aim to influence the formulation of global climate policy. This will be an important point for us at the Ministerial Meeting in Salekhard in October.

Implementation of the Kyoto Protocol is a first step towards common action. Action that is needed to preserve the delicate balance in the global climate

system, and to avoid disruptions in the world's ecosystems. Global participation in this process is crucial, and we urge the United States to join the other members of the Arctic Council in the multilateral efforts necessary to make substantive progress.

Madame Chair,

Climate change has direct effects on key economic activities in the Arctic region. These include fisheries, transportation, mining and oil and gas exploitation. These industries are fundamental to the national economies of several of the Arctic States. They are also cornerstones of the local economies in many northern communities.

The traditional lifestyles of Arctic indigenous peoples depend directly on the Arctic environment. In northern Sweden, Saami communities are forced to adapt their grazing practices to changes in ecosystems, to ensure the continued survival of reindeer herding as a source of livelihood and cultural identity.

Mining and forestry industries need to review land use management. Infrastructure such as dams, hydroelectricity plants, railways, roads and bridges need to be surveyed for structural damage caused by a warming climate.

The Arctic is changing. We, in the Arctic States, need to monitor this change very closely. Sustainable development, but also sustainable management of natural resources, is necessary to preserve our sensitive Arctic environment.

Madame Chair,

The Arctic region has always had a strategic importance. But the political focus has shifted, from military security to energy security and sustainable development. That raises the question of whether we are heading for new and stronger conflicts of interests in the Arctic?

Oil and gas exploration is already under way on a large scale. New sources of oil and gas will become accessible. New global transport lanes will open up in the Arctic as the ice melts. The approaches we choose to meet these challenges will have lasting consequences. One thing is certain: there will be increased risks to the vulnerable Arctic environment, as a result of exploitation of additional non-renewable sources of energy and the resulting increase in emissions of greenhouse gases. My Government has drawn one clear conclusion from this dilemma. We have decided to pursue policies that aim to radically reduce our national dependency on hydrocarbons by the year 2020.

The Arctic environment is precious and unique, but the people who live and work in the Arctic have a right to share in the welfare of our societies. About four million people inhabit the circumpolar Arctic, most of them west of the Ural Mountains in the European part of the Arctic, the Barents Euro-Arctic region. And it is an important principle that all our citizens in the Arctic have the same right to economic and social progress as other inhabitants in our countries.

This means that the indigenous peoples of the Arctic must be allowed to find ways to maintain and develop their cultures and traditional sources of livelihood. Cities, local communities and major modern industries must be encouraged to prosper. New economic activities must be able to develop and expand. Tourism is already a growth sector in the Arctic. Travelling around the Arctic today, one is more likely to meet a tourist than an indigenous person, a scientist or a polar bear.

Conflicting interests in the Arctic can only be reconciled if the Governments of the Arctic States work together and pursue policies for economic and social development that ensure sustainable development throughout the circumpolar Arctic. The sensitivity of Arctic ecosystems, established indigenous rights and local cultures must be fully taken into account and respected. This should be the focus of the discussion on “Arctic Governance”. The Arctic parliamentarians are needed in that discussion. Your Conference Statement will be an important input to Governments and to the Arctic Council Ministerial Meeting.

Madame Chair,

Sweden has started to prepare for the International Polar Year in 2007-2008. This is an international endeavour under the auspices of the United Nations World Meteorological Organization and the International Council of Scientific Unions. It aims to promote excellence in science, to explore creative new ideas, and to facilitate cost-effective use of demanding logistics and advanced equipment. I know that you will be discussing this important international undertaking tomorrow.

Research and science have always played a major role in Arctic policy making. Polar research is by definition an international endeavour and the Swedish polar research community is cooperating with researchers and research organisations in other countries.

There are several unique Arctic research platforms of world class in this country, where foreign scientists are welcome and where major international research programmes are carried out. One example is the Royal Swedish

Academy of Sciences' research station at Abisko, with its network of terrestrial substations. I understand that you will hear more about that tomorrow. Other examples are the Esrange launch facility for space research and atmospheric balloons, and the "Odin" satellite. Our custom-built icebreaker research vessel, the "Oden", last year conducted a very sophisticated drilling expedition at 87.5 degrees North, close to the North Pole, together with the Russian icebreaker Sovyetskij Soyuz. That expedition collected soil samples that contain 50 million years of climate history from deep down in the Arctic Sea floor. 50 million years – that, if anything, is taking a long look at how things are.

One of the essential requirements for successful Arctic research is access to reliable data. That is why it is so urgent to put in place a permanent, comprehensive network of monitoring stations throughout the Arctic that will combine scientific monitoring with indigenous observations and traditional knowledge. We hope that such a network, under the auspices of the Arctic Council, can be a concrete and lasting legacy of the International Polar Year.

Madame Chair,

There are many other good practical reasons for intensifying our Arctic cooperation. And the good thing about all these efforts is that they serve a directly useful purpose – to preserve our climate, to help make the Earth liveable for all years to come, and to serve the welfare of the people of the Arctic.

Thank you for your attention.