

THE SECOND UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE ON OUTER SPACE—AN
OPPORTUNITY FOR THE FUTURE

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On 27 August 1968, in Vienna, Austria, Dr. Vikram A. Sarabhai, Secretary of India's Atomic Energy Department and Chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission and India's National Committee for Space Research, was reflecting upon the United Nations Conference on the Exploration and Peaceful Uses of Outer Space at its closing session in his capacity as Vice-President and Scientific Chairman of the Conference. To the representatives of seventy-eight Member States, nine specialized agencies and four other international organizations gathered in the Hofburg Palace, Dr. Sarabhai said:

... The question has often been asked: 'Can one afford to undertake space research?' But I am sure there are many here like myself who will ask: 'Can anyone afford to ignore the applications of space research?' One departs from the Conference with the conviction that applications of space research touch every facet of life. . . .¹

In those early years, the conviction that the application of space research would touch every facet of life on earth was shared by many throughout the world. The imagination of people had been fired by the concept of our ability to venture forth from the planet earth into the vast unknown area of outer space. The enthusiasm and public support of outer space research and exploration stemmed not only from an awareness of these achievements in a technological sense, but also from a philosophical and spiritual feeling.

The reservoir of public participation in the spirit of outer space research and exploration peaked in July 1969 when two U.S. astronauts stood upon the surface of the moon. In a message of congratulations, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, U. Thant, seemed to speak for all when he said:

"Words are inadequate to express the emotions with which we have all witnessed the extraordinary and historic achievement of the past twenty-four hours. The moon, which man has seen throughout his life on earth as a mystery beyond human research, a goddess, an inspiration and a thing of transcendent beauty, as now been reached by two gallant men. . . ."

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† The views expressed are those of the author alone and do not reflect the views of the United Nations.

¹Practical Benefits of Space Exploration, U.N. Publ. Sales No. 69. I. 25 (1969).

"The world has watched the moon landing with emotion, pride and a sense of human solidarity which only the greatest achievements of men can evoke. . . ."²

Indeed the world had watched the moon landing. Through the technology of communication satellites, hundreds of millions of people shared in mankind's grand achievement. The vision of that "fragile blue jewel in a sea of darkness" - the view of planet earth as seen from the moon, became an intensely personal one for many. From this new vantage point, earth and its people were seen adrift upon a voyage - "Riders on the earth together" in the words of poet Archibald MacLeish. It reaffirmed the message of the United Nations *Ad Hoc* Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space, when, in reporting to the fourteenth session of the General Assembly in 1959, it stated:

" . . . Space activities . . . inherently ignore national boundaries . . . and must to a large extent be an effort of the Planet Earth as a whole . . ."³

The pace of space research and exploration continued after the historic flight of Apollo 11. New spectaculars of space achievement were accomplished by an ever growing number of nations. The applications of space research increased and Dr. Sarabhai's conviction that such applications would touch every facet of human life was fast becoming a reality. Within the United Nations, and in a variety of bi-lateral and multi-lateral arrangements, Member States were increasing their co-operative efforts, both in the research and use of outer space as well as in the sharing of benefits derived from such activities. The United Nations Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space and its Legal and Scientific and Technical Sub-Committees laboured over a series of priority agenda items, endeavouring to reach agreements which would lead to international treaties, conventions and co-operative programmes in areas of major importance to Member States. While the problems arose in each of these areas, the international lawyers, scientists and engineers never permitted the spirit of co-operation to lag. As one recent example of this spirit, in 1979, after seven years of detailed discussion involving compromises by all the interested parties, an Agreement Governing the Activities of States on the Moon and Other Celestial Bodies was forwarded by the Outer Space Committee to the 34th General Assembly of the United Nations for approval.⁴

Yet, despite wide recognition that accomplishments in the field of outer space have profoundly affected concepts of mankind's future on the planet Earth, as well as in the universe itself, public interest in and support of outer space research and exploration today has diminished greatly. If one examined the attention given world-wide in the mass media to the 10th anniversary of the Apollo 11 moon landing as compared to the

²Statement by Secretary - General U. Thant. U.N. Press Release SG/SM/1134 (July 21, 1969).

³14 U.N. GAOR, Annexes (Agenda Item 25), U.N. Doc. A/14/41 (1959).

⁴34 U.N. GAOR, 2 Annexes (Supp. No. 20), U.N. Doc. A/34/20 (1979).

columns of newspaper space, radio time and television programming devoted to the decay and re-entry of the U.S. spacecraft Skylab, it was clear that the exploration of outer space was being characterized as another technological area which could destroy the quality of life on earth by raining random and uncontrollable death and destruction from the sky.

In the face of this, how is it possible to rekindle the kind of public support which is absolutely essential if nations are to undertake the large-scale outer space projects of the future? What can be done to make people throughout the world understand that, having taken this initial step into outer space, there will be no turning back? The exploration and use of outer space will continue for centuries to come; and, the impact of this new frontier will have a direct effect upon the life of every individual as well as upon the scientific, technological and international political scene of the future. There is no question that the world at present shares a sense of crisis. There is a crisis of morale and identity caused by the disruption of traditional cultures and frustrated expectation. There is the crisis born of outraged human dignity over the often degrading aspects of life even in industrialized societies. Both developed and lesser developed nations share a sense of despair. The problems facing the world at large are of such complexity and of such magnitude and the competition to focus world attention upon specific issues so great that no longer can it be expected that substance alone will be sufficient to focus public attention.

The form in which a subject is presented to the general public becomes an important aspect in the effort to gain attention. This is not to imply that form is to be stressed at the expense of substance, nor that substance be modified to accommodate form. It is only to state a pragmatic concept, i.e., if the objective is to convince people, it is essential that they be persuaded to listen attentively to the facts being presented. The intelligent public support of the exploration and peaceful uses of outer space is important enough, that every opportunity to once again marshal public attention and public support in this field be examined.

The forthcoming second United Nations Conference on the Exploration and Peaceful Uses of Outer Space presents such an opportunity. The Preparatory Committee for the Conference has recommended to the 34th General Assembly of the United Nations that the Outer Space Conference be held in 1982, - twenty-five years from the date that the first man-made satellite was launched into orbit around the earth.⁵ A twenty-fifth anniversary of outer space research and exploration can be made an occasion not only to celebrate the achievements of the past and to discuss current projects and problems, but to forecast and highlight the potential achievements and benefits which can be accomplished in the next twenty-five years!

Ibid.

In projecting into the 21st century, it is well to remember that it was the visionary spirit of our political, scientific and technical leaders that so captured the public imagination and support in the early years of outer space research. It is not too late to accomplish this again. Certainly the space projects of tomorrow, so carefully and persuasively put forward by men like Dr. Peter Glaser⁶ and Dr. Gerard K. O'Neil,⁷ are the kind of imaginative challenges which can rekindle that spirit. And an outpouring of public support can give courage to political and economic leaders to make decisions to take up these challenges in a realistic time frame.

The second United Nations Conference on Outer Space could be the symbolic rallying point to once again raise our sights and spirits to the "High Frontier" of tomorrow. Even the form of the Conference can reflect this spirit. Rather than the usual earth-bound meetings, let this Conference soar into space by the use of satellites. Delegates to the Outer Space Conference could have the opportunity of being addressed by Heads of States, leading international experts, and people throughout the world because the imaginative use of communication and Direct Broadcast Satellites could truly make this a "World Conference." Even the work of United Nations interpreters and other United Nations servicing staff could be dramatized by permitting them to remain in their home base and perform their tasks through orbiting satellites. The importance of other satellites could also be highlighted at the Conference in concrete and dramatic terms. If imaginatively conceived, the Outer Space Conference could become of major interest to the mass media.

This recognition of our future goals could also be reflected in the substance of the Outer Space Conference. There should be place in such a conference for the kind of constructive concepts for international co-operative projects which will take use well into the 21st century. We have just begun our journey into outer space and there is need to be even more daring in our approach to the future. It is well to recognize the potential problems in efforts to institute arrangements in the peaceful uses of outer space which will be of benefit to all Member States regardless of their economic or technological development. But it is also well to recognize that an over emphasis upon finding solutions to every specific detailed problem too often prevents consideration of completely new approaches which would at the outset eliminate many of those specific problems.

In this respect, an examination of international statutory law reveals that it comes about usually as a result of the codification of existing rules which have gained universal acceptance. But most of the rules of international space law have emerged out of an imaginative and innovative effort at international legislation. The body of international lawyers can revive that spirit which led to the rapid formulation of a new body of

⁶Glaser, *The Outlook for Solar Power Satellites*, Sunsat Energy Council (Mar. 2, 1979).

⁷G. O'Neil, *The High Frontier* (1977).

international space law and create the kind of new institutional and legal framework which will permit the world community to continue to move daringly into the universe for the ultimate benefit of all.

There is this opportunity, a second world conference on outer space. While it is a conference of governments, the tone and spirit of the conference will be greatly influenced by the thoughts and words of the many individual international experts who deal with the scientific, technical, legal, political, social and economic aspects of outer space exploration. It can be made into an historic occasion which might well set the spirit and pace of an international programme in outer space for the next twenty-five years. The challenge is to all who believe in the value of outer space research and exploration. The time to take up this challenge is now, as governments begin to plan for the second United Nations Conference on the Exploration and Peaceful Uses of Outer Space. It is well to recall the words of Robert Goddard, the American pioneer of rocketry: "It is difficult to say what is impossible, for the dream of yesterday is the hope of today and the reality of tomorrow."⁸

⁸R. Goddard, *The Ultimate Migration*, Manuscript dated Jan. 14, 1918, The Goddard Biblio. Log, Friends of the Goddard Library (Nov. 11, 1972).