



Welcome Speech by Ambassador Manuel Sager Head of Political Division V, Federal Department for Foreign Affairs 20th anniversary of the Basel Convention

Madam Executive Secretary
Excellencies
Honorable Guests
Dear Friends

It is my pleasure to welcome you here in Switzerland to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the Basel Convention!

In the early 1980s, when Switzerland, together with Hungary, called for an international Convention on hazardous waste, only the most audacious may have expected that we would come together one day here in Basel to celebrate the success and the future of something called the Basel Convention.

The call in those days for international rules for the cross-border movement of hazardous waste was a response to a phenomenon that is sometimes referred to as “toxic colonialism”: With the tightening of environmental laws in developed nations in the 1970s, the costs of the disposal of hazardous waste rose dramatically. Avoiding high disposal costs and following a “not in my backyard” approach, “toxic traders” increasingly organized dumping of hazardous waste in countries that had no or less severe restrictions and were unable to treat waste properly. We all remember pictures of leaking drums containing hazardous waste on various beaches around the world. Irresponsible waste-traders and waste producers got rid of toxic chemicals at lowest possible costs, poisoning the environment and endangering the health of the local population. One of the famous cases from those years was the [Khian Sea waste disposal incident](#): The cargo ship *Khian Sea* carrying toxic ashes from the incineration of waste of the city of Philadelphia, dumped half of its load on a beach in Haiti. After it was forced to leave Haiti, the ship sailed for many months, changed its name several times but was unable to unload the cargo in any port. Finally the crew was believed to have dumped much of its toxic cargo at sea. The Basel Convention was developed in response to such irresponsible behaviour.

We should not vilify the production of new chemicals or the application of new technologies to known chemicals. They have both helped us to successfully fight diseases, to enhance agricultural production and to generally increase our comfort and well-being. However, the use of chemicals, beneficial though it may be, often involves significant risks and harm to human health and to the environment. The benefits have a flip-side: the poisoning of the environment and water, the exposure of

men and women to polluted air and the suffering of children, often the poorest and most disadvantaged, living in a toxic environment. And those who benefit the most from the use of hazardous chemicals are often not those who pay the cost. This is not acceptable.

The Basel Convention is trying to correct this by providing that:

- no hazardous waste shall be exported in a country that is not able to manage such waste in an environmentally sound manner;
- the production of hazardous waste shall be minimized, and
- hazardous waste shall be treated safely as closely as possible to its source.

The Basel Convention thus tries to make sure that those who benefit from the production of hazardous chemicals also bear the risks. The Basel Convention ensures comprehensive environmental and political responsibility.

The Basel Convention is a success story. The *Khian Sea* incident could not happen today. Exports of hazardous waste from developed to developing countries that are unable to treat them adequately have significantly decreased. This is an important step, but it is not enough: We need to further strengthen this regime, to ensure its effective implementation, and to close existing gaps. We need to address hazardous waste as a part of a comprehensive life-cycle policy. Already when designing and producing goods, we must take into account the waste that will result and strive to avoid toxicity and provide for later recycling. A comprehensive life-cycle policy considerably reducing environmental impact must be our guide for the future.

Let me conclude by stressing that Switzerland has a special relationship with the Basel Convention:

- Switzerland, together with Hungary, launched the movement leading to the Basel Convention;
- Basel hosted the diplomatic conference in 1989 where the convention was signed and received its name;
- Geneva is the host of the Convention Secretariat; and
- Switzerland has initiated crucial initiatives within the Basel Convention, such as: the Mobile Phone Partnership initiative which was the first Public Private Partnership within the Basel Convention; the newly initiated Public Private Partnership on Computing Equipment; and, together with Indonesia, the Country-Led Initiative to further protect countries that are unable to ensure proper treatment of hazardous waste from unwanted imports.

Switzerland is honored to be so closely associated with the Basel Convention. Yet, we are aware that this close relationship also entails a special responsibility. Let me assure you that Switzerland will continue its commitment to meet this responsibility and to participate in the work of this important international instrument that is the Basel Convention.