

Ceylon Daily News

The English Daily with the largest circulation in Sri Lanka

Pollution in South Asia

Increasing world awareness of the multi-faceted environmental issues is a healthy sign. No country, particularly the developed and the developing nations, can ignore with impunity the growing menace of pollution, which primarily affects the health of the people.

There are other aspects of the matter, too, that call for immediate action — problems like the wasteful use of natural resources, the energy crisis, the spread of the desert region, depletion of marine life and the destruction of forest cover.

We, in Sri Lanka, are in the throes of a power cut for the second successive year, precisely because we have allowed our forest cover to be wantonly destroyed and have, as a result, been faced by the worst droughts in living memory. We have learnt our lesson the hard way.

The rapid growth of industry is confronting us increasingly with the problem of environmental pollution — comparatively new to us but one of the major health hazards of the advanced countries, where the smoke of a thousand chimneys taints the air and the waste from a thousand factories pollutes streams, rivers and seas.

When the very air we breathe is impure, when the streets reek of rotting garbage, when the galleys and the sewers overflow, when the beaches are unclean — how, then, can man live without endangering his health, his life? Animal and plant life, too, are threatened by man's use of lethal insecticides, while marine life is endangered by oil slicks and the waste that flows into the sea or is disposed of into it.

These are problems that seriously affect the entire South Asian region, in varying degrees. They affect everyone, irrespective of race, creed or politics. It is therefore refreshing to know that eight of the countries concerned are to do something about it. Besides Sri Lanka they are Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Iran, the Maldives, Nepal and Pakistan.

They meet in Colombo from today till Wednesday and are expected to adopt a declaration and finalise working arrangements for establishing a South Asia Co-operative Environment Program (SACEP).

The formation of this body follows a decision taken by a meeting of experts organised by the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) and held in Bangalore last year. The Secretariat of the Co-ordinating Committee is to be established in Colombo, the meeting has decided.

The Colombo meeting is expected to identify programs and projects concerning various environmental problems which have possibilities for co-operation and prospects for immediate action. Already, some countries have agreed to take individual responsibility for specific activities.

The participating countries have all agreed to support the program financially. Sri Lanka has offered contributions to the value of Rs. 1.2 million to the SACEP secretariat. UNEP and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) have indicated their willingness to help; and it is hoped that help will also be forthcoming from other development assistance institutions.

The meeting is of special importance to South Asia. No politics are involved. The problems to be dealt with transcend not only political but also all other divisive issues. We take pleasure in wishing the meeting all success — with this proviso, that it will not be confined to words. Mere setting up of high-powered organisations will not be enough. What is needed is high-powered action.