

Inaugural Address by the Hon. R. Premadasa, M.P., Prime Minister of Sri Lanka at the Meeting of Ministers of the South Asia Co-operative Environment Programme

23rd February, 1981

I am very happy to welcome you all to the Ministers Meeting for the establishment of the South Asia Co-operative Environment Programme. Your presence in Colombo today reflects the interest that the Governments and people of the South Asian region have shown in the protection and management of the environment in which we live. It is also a recognition of the need to work together in co-operation to meet the challenge of environmental management for development in our part of the world.

I have no doubt that you will all agree with me that the need to find solutions to the problems of environment is critical. Indeed at no time in human history, has the need for remedial action been so urgent or insistent. In recent years, there has been increasing doubt about the validity of conventional growth patterns. Both in the developing world as in the developed world, the value of the quality of life has come to the forefront. Measured in the conventional terms of gross domestic output, the economic performance of many developing countries, have been close to targeted growth rates. However, in many critical areas little progress has been made. Particularly this is so in the sectors which contribute to the overall betterment of the quality of life. This is true both at national and international levels. We are still confronted with the problems of rapidly growing populations. We face the irreversible problem of a depletion of natural resources. We are plagued with inflation, the depression of world trade and a marked deterioration in the global environment.

All of our countries need to sustain our economic and social development to meet the demands of a growing population. Development requires an ever expanding utilization of our natural resources and the environment. It is now well known, that in the development process, the environment — the life support system of the society — can be impaired, as well as enhanced. The methods we choose, the strategies we adopt, could constitute either a constraint or the potential for the achievement of the basic goals of development. It is therefore essential that the mutually dependent relationships between development and environment be fully understood in our strategies for development. This is so at national as well as at regional and international levels.

Serious pre-occupation with environmental problems is a relatively recent phenomenon in Sri Lanka as well as in most of the South Asian countries. Of course there has always been concern for issues relating to environment. But it was only in the last few years that new problems have emerged which have given it an entirely new dimension. Paradoxically, these resulted from the efforts made by our countries to accelerate development.

Some of the problems can be attributed to the growth and extension of primary export activities. These had serious effects on the depletion of our best located non-renewable natural resources. It resulted in the deterioration of resources, such as forests, marine life and agricultural land. Yet other problems are related to the process of "modernization". This has been specially so in agriculture, industry, transportation, urbanization and the attempt to reproduce in our countries, the life-styles and patterns of the developed world. There are problems caused too by the pressure of the growing numbers of displaced rural and urban poor on increasingly scarce land resources. In the rural areas, the clearing of forests and the destruction of soil cover has led to pollution and contamination of both land and water.

There is therefore, no doubt that the increased environmental degradation and depletion of resources which results from human activity in our countries, are due mostly to growing numbers and the rising per capita production and consumption. These situations stem from the specific technology of production and the pattern of consumption currently in use.

The dilemma for us in the developing world is that there is also an urgent need for development. Poverty brings in its wake a form of environmental degradation which forces its victims into destructive

processes while leaving them without the means to cope with the ensuing results. It is no longer possible to contrast the preservation of the environment with the necessity for development. Both are related and inseparable expressions of the capacity of man to improve his life as well as to provide for the well being of future generations.

It is in this context that I welcome the establishment of the South Asia Co-operative Environment Programme, which could provide the basis for a joint effort at the regional level to overcome our common problems. The wealth and variety of experience in the South Asian region in making possible sustained improvements in the quality and life of their people is extraordinary. The experience ranges from the appropriate application of traditional technologies to harmonious human settlement and adjustments to existing eco-systems. We have had imaginative uses of what has been customarily regarded as waste matter.

In this situation there is no doubt that the decisions that this distinguished gathering will take, will have practical application for the countries within our region. It is our hope, I am sure, that they will have utility also for the other regions and for international co-operation for development.

I commend the steps taken by the Regional Office of the UNEP to establish the South Asia Co-operative Environment Programme. What should we hope to achieve through this meeting and through the Programme in the future? Our first objective, I should think, should be to present a coherent framework of ideas and prescriptions that would enable Governments within the region to discuss, and analyse meaningfully, the integration of environmental concerns with economic goals and policies. We should identify to what extent such integration may require changes in existing life-styles and patterns of development. Equally important would be the need to stimulate a continuing effort, in individual countries in the region to adopt environmentally sound projects, programmes and policies. To that end, emphasis should be placed on carefully selected fields for action at the national and regional levels. Finally, an objective which appears to be worth pursuing, is an exchange of ideas and expressions on not only the manner of formulating long-term perspectives and strategies, but also on the practical examples which testify to the validity of such perspectives.

I am happy, therefore, that Sri Lanka was able to host this most important meeting and to provide facilities for the establishment of the Office of the Programme in Colombo.

I take this opportunity to express my gratitude to the Director and staff of the Regional Office of the UNEP who initiated the establishment of this Co-operative Programme, and to the distinguished delegates of all member countries who have extended their co-operation for its success. We can all be gratified that today we are contributing to the beginning of a process of fundamental importance.

Your Excellencies, distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen, I have great pleasure in formally inaugurating this meeting. I thank you.