

Message from Dr. Mostafa K. Tolba Executive Director, UNEP.

It is with great pleasure that I wish to convey my warmest greetings and felicitations at the inauguration of the Meeting of Ministers to set up the South Asia Cooperative Environment Programme. It had been my earnest intention to attend this High Level Meeting personally, for which I had, in fact, tentatively made arrangement. It was only due to entirely unforeseen and unavoidable circumstances that I have now not been able to be with you. At the outset, therefore, I wish to express my sincere regrets at not participating personally at the inauguration.

I recall with great warmth my visits to many of the SACEP countries during my previous term of office as Executive Director and the close personal associations I was able to develop with many of the leaders, some of whom are today also at this Meeting. Just at this beginning of my new term of office as Executive Director of UNEP, I wish to note the support and encouragement that I have always received from the SACEP countries, both personally and officially. I remain grateful to them and through this message seek to reciprocate their own goodwill and cooperation so readily extended to me.

The launching of a South Asia Cooperative Programme is, indeed, an initiative of indisputable significance for the SACEP countries, for the world community, and from the point of view of UNEP and the United Nations. I have had the benefit of following the preparations for this Meeting through the clear and concise documentation for it and the Report of the Inter-Governmental Expert Group Meeting held at Bangalore last March. I wish to cite here a few of the aspects which are of specific significance:

— Sub-regional programmes have already been launched in other parts of the region — in the South Pacific, in ASEAN, in the Mekong Basin. The South Asia Programme thus comes later. Yet, what SACEP has achieved is something unique; where there was no organisation, no machinery for cooperation, the countries have decided to set up machinery for it, I am, indeed, gratified that the environment has been considered important enough to take this step forward in cooperation. Perhaps I should be even more gratified that environment served as the instrument through which, I believe for the first time, a cooperative system in South Asia came to be set up. The experience of working together that this will undoubtedly create, augers well for this rich and ancient sub-region; it may serve also as the harbinger of wider forms of cooperation in the future.

— It is clear from the excellent programme preparations that resource conservation and rational utilisation, as ideas, have all been geared also to development for the benefit of peoples; seeking to achieve harmonisation of environment with development and to secure sustained development without destruction. It is an approach which immediately evokes the fullest support of UNEP and, I sincerely trust, from the international community. In these preparations you have, indeed, taken full stock of the vast losses that have occurred in the past, are continuing to occur and threaten to do so in the future, if we do not act now, in almost all your natural resources, ranging over forests, soils, crops, pastures, mangroves and seas. It has been mentioned, for instance, that 'by the Year 2000 there will be something like 1000 million people living under the shadows and under the waters of the Himalayas along its sub-continental range'. It has been mentioned, in the case of one country in your sub-region, that 'its most important export has been the enormous tonnage of soil that washes down annually to other countries', leading also to disasters and floods in these countries. The coastal ecosystem in yet another country of the sub-region has been said 'to constitute the largest such living laboratory in the world'; and some of the island atolls in the Indian Ocean are 'unique even by South Pacific standards'. The area of the greatest damage in the last great cyclone that hit the Bay of Bengal happened to be exactly that hinterland where the mangroves had been destroyed. One could go on; and these are but examples of a situation which you have now determined to change, for the enhancement of the environment and for sustaining development.

— A highly noteworthy aspect of the co-operation, and perhaps a sound lead and example to others, is the self-help or self-financing component that has been built into the SACEP structure from the beginning. Not least, this has included a strong recognition of the 'wealth of capability and expertise' available within your own countries. At the same time, this is not considered as an excuse for potential

donor countries and bodies not to play their part, in the spirit and in fulfilment of TCDC, ECDC, NIEO, and the NIDS.*

— Finally, as one good reason for the confidence behind the establishment of SACEP, your countries have already set up strong national environmental administrative structures, with increasing national commitment and outstanding leadership. I note with warm recollection that no less than the Honourable Prime Minister is the Head of the Environment Organisation in Sri Lanka. A similar development has recently materialized in India with the Honourable Prime Minister as Head of environment for that country. In Iran, the environmental authority has been located in the Office of the Prime Minister. Elsewhere in the SACEP region, commitment at the highest levels has been equally clear and unequivocal.

These are but a few examples of why we attach such a great importance to the fulfilment of your cooperative effort.

Before I conclude I should mention that the programme priorities as you have identified them accord greatly with UNEP's priorities of work being undertaken at various levels. I wish to assure you that the benefit of UNEP's own programmes and such assistance as we will be able to give you through them are fully available to SACEP.

I convey my deep pride and gratitude to you for the step being taken today and wish you God speed and prosperity in your endeavour.

* *Technical Cooperation Among Development Countries [TCDC]; Economic Cooperation Among Developing Countries [ECDC]; New International Economic Order [NIEO]; New International Development Strategy [NIDS].*