

PRESS SUMMARY

South Asian Environment Programme Launched

Possible basis for economic and political co-operation in the region

Ministerial representatives from eight South Asian countries have launched a joint programme to tackle common environmental problems of major national concern.

At a meeting, held in Colombo, Sri Lanka, from 25 to 28 February, they adopted a declaration establishing the South Asian Co-operative Environment Programme (SACEP) and Articles of Association setting out working arrangements concerning its implementation.

The countries were: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Iran, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. The meeting was organised by the Sri Lanka Government and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). The move to set up the South Asia programme was triggered off at a preparatory meeting held at Bangalore in March last year.

According to the Colombo declaration, the Programme could also provide a "valuable basis for mutual co-operation in the fields of social and economic co-operation".

The South Asian Programme will aim to bring about a better management of the environment in the region, particularly through eliminating the wasteful use of natural resources upon which many development activities depend.

Some of the main functions of the programme are:

- promoting co-operative activities to deal with major environmental problems concerning development activities
- facilitating an exchange of information and expertise among countries on environmental issues
- using local resources for implementing projects
- encouraging support from interested donor countries and other sources.

Three principal bodies will be responsible for implementing the South Asia programme. They are: the Governing Council -- the policy-making body; the Consultative Committee; and the Secretariat, which will be located in Colombo.

Member countries will co-operate with the Secretariat in implementing the programme. They will take individual responsibility and act as "focal points" for initiating and co-ordinating programmes on pressing environmental problems identified by the meeting.

Iran will take direct responsibility for environmental quality standards, wildlife and genetic resource conservation. India will look after education and training, particularly training in wildlife management legislation. Pakistan will be focal point for conservation of mountain ecosystems and watersheds, while Bangladesh has opted for conservation of mangrove areas. Sri Lanka will co-ordinate programmes to evaluate the costs and benefits of environmental measures and Afghanistan will deal with social forestry.

On some issues two or more countries have assumed joint responsibility. Bangladesh together with the Maldives will be responsible for island ecosystems. Iran has joined hands with Pakistan and India on energy matters.

The Regional Centre for Technology Transfer, established by the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) will stimulate programmes concerning the development and transfer of technologies for recycling wastes.

On technical and financial matters, the South Asian countries have agreed to support the programme. Sri Lanka has offered to provide contributions to the value of about \$66,000 to the Secretariat for a two-year period. Some countries have already initiated joint activities as part of the programme.

Furthermore, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has expressed strong support for SACEP. It has indicated its willingness to extend assistance to SACEP within the framework of its Asia Pacific inter-country programme for 1981-1986.

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) has so far provided approximately \$70,000, mainly for the preparatory work. The organization expects to continue further over-all support and provide assistance to specific activities within the limits of its resources.

Before the Colombo meeting, a mission, comprising representatives of the Programme and UNEP visited certain major donor countries. The response received was encouraging. A similar mission to the Kuwait Fund for Economic Development was arranged; however, the dates have been re-scheduled.

Commenting on the outcome of the meeting Mr. C. Suriyakumaran, Director, UNEP Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific said: "This is the first time in the history of the South Asian region where countries have come together to launch a common programme."

Pointing out that most environmental problems transcend national boundaries, he added: "The situation requires united action, SACEP will give impetus to national programmes. It will also try to halt duplicatory research activities that are often a drain on public coffers."

Since the Colombo meeting, Bhutan has joined the South Asia programme. It is understood that Burma will also soon follow suit and participate in the activities.