

## Regional cooperation will help marine and coastal resources

- Minister Senanayake



The participants of the second Intergovernmental Ministerial Meeting of South Asian Seas Program (SACEP) held at the Colombo Hilton on July 1. From left are: Fisheries and Aquatic Resources Minister Mahinda Wijesekara, Pakistan High Commissioner Ashraf Qureshi, Environment and Natural Resources Minister Rukman Senanayake, Representative of the UN Environment Programme Ms. Veerle Vanderweerd and Director General, SACEP, Mahboob Elahi. (Picture By Renuka Alwis)

by Nadira Gunatilleke

"We are already in the process of strengthening the Marine Pollution Prevention Authority through the institutional strengthening of the oil spill contingency management project funded by the Norwegian Government," Fisheries and Ocean Resources Minister Mahinda Wijesekara said.

He was delivering the Keynote address at the inauguration of the second Inter-governmental Ministerial Meeting of the South Asian Seas Program (SACEP) held at the Colombo Hilton on Monday. Minister Wijesekara said that signing of the MoU and endorsement of the South Asian Regional Oil Spill Contingency Plan is very important to Sri Lanka. Most of the oil tanker traffic passes through the south of Sri Lanka, and any disaster will have catastrophic consequences for our country and the countries in the South Asian region.

"We have identified the problem of oil pollution due to ships, offshore units, seaports and oil handling facilities as a significant environmental problem. Therefore, recognizing the importance of taking prompt and effective

action to minimize the damage and the need for combating oil pollution, it is imperative that all the member countries agree to the contents of the MoU," the Minister said.

"Environment and Natural Resources Minister Rukman Senanayake said that nationally we are faced with several environmental problems including land degradation, soil erosion, loss of biodiversity and disposal of solid waste. When we consider the biodiversity it is not only the biodiversity on land, even the biodiversity in the marine environment especially the corals is also under threat. Most of our corals are already dead and even those existing are under threat. Since their regeneration time is very long, we have to take substantial measures to conserve them".

"We cannot protect these marine and coastal resources without regional cooperation. Sri Lanka is always supportive of regional international cooperation. Oil spills are a regional concern as its effects are not confined to the seas of one country alone, but goes beyond administrative boundaries and would cause serious damage to the seas of other

surrounding countries as well. Oil spills, no matter how large or small they are, can have very serious impacts. The ruin caused by miles of blackened beaches and disruption to the coastal habitat, fishery, tourism and other industries can be very damaging both to the environment and to the economy as a whole," the Minister added.

The Minister pointed out the importance of the signing of the MoU for cooperation on the response to marine and chemical spills in the South Asian Region.

Pakistan High Commissioner Ashraf Qureshi said that we have to protect Earth as a trust to be handed over to the future generation. Life on earth is linked to oceans. Seventy one percent of the earth's surface is covered by water. Regional approach to control marine pollution is essential, he added.

Representatives of the United Nations Environment Program, Ms. Veerle Vanderweerd, Director General, SACEP, Mahboob Elahi and Director, Global Affairs and Environmental Economics, Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources, Dr. Suren Batagoda also spoke.