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ISLAMABAD - Minister for Science and Technology Zahid Hamid has said that economies of South Asian countries are growing at a rapid rate, but they are also facing severe common environmental problems. He said these common problems can be tackled effectively only through unhampered collaboration and cooperation at the regional level.

“Regional cooperation and a collaborative approach represent the way forward to overcome our common challenges,” he added.

He expressed these views in his keynote speech at the three-day 13th meeting of the Governing Council of South Asia Co-operative Environment Programme (SACEP) and the 5th Inter-governmental Ministerial meeting of South Asia Seas Programme (SASP) held on Sunday.

Zahid Hamid said that strengthened regional efforts need to focus on a range of response options and instruments to address these challenges of environmental degradation and climate change-induced disasters, such as floods that are common problem of the South Asia region.

“However, regional partners need to emphasize the realization for increasing responsibilities and greater cooperative efforts by all stakeholders.

Director-General of the SACEP, Anura Jayatilake, said that the SACEP is the first inter-governmental forum in the world where all South Asian countries come together to support SACEP initiatives and programmes during 30 years of its existence since 1981.

He cautioned, “Our collective, viable and robust approaches to cope with environmental and climatic challenges can reduce miseries and negative impacts on lives and livelihoods of the millions of people in the region.”

In his address, Climate Change Division Secretary, Raja Hasan Abbas, said that the high-level meetings of the SACEP and SEAS sessions

have given a unique opportunity to hold productive discussions related to environmental issues with political leadership of the South Asian countries, senior government officials, representatives of the UN organizations and civil society. “Respective country’s situations with regards to environment and status of implantation of GC 12 decisions were discussed along with the way forward for how the numerous challenges we all face can be addressed effectively,” he said.

Talking about intensive proceedings of environmental related technical sessions, the Climate Change Division’s Secretary said the last three days witnessed the ministers and high-level officials meetings, networking and knowledge, intensive discussions over environmental challenges including the National Biodiversity Strategy, Promoting Sustainable Consumption and Production inouth Asia, Environmental Data and Information Management system, Control and Prevention of Air Pollution, Waste Management, Conservation of Wetlands, Regional Marine and Coastal Biodiversity Strategy, Ocean Governance and most importantly the commitments made by the Governing Council of the South Asia Co-operative Environment Programme. Joint Secretary of the Ministry of Earth Sciences of the Government of India, Shri Anand Singh Khaki, in his address said that SACEP and SASP have got immense progress.

Commitments of the member countries to develop SACEP and its associated programmes in a pro-active manner would lead South Asia as a climate and environment-conscious region, he added.

Minister for Environment and Renewable Energy of Sri Lanka, Susil Premajyantha said “Protection and management of regional environment is of paramount importance for all SAARC member countries. There is no doubt that the regional countries face many environmental and climate change related challenges, but SACEP commitments to initiate viable programmes and contingency plans to deal commons climate change-induced natural disasters”.

Earlier, during the meeting of the 13th Governing Council, SACEP, elected the office bearers for the next term. Pakistan’s Climate Change Division Secretary Raja Hasan Abbas has been elected as a Chairman of SACEP, Karma Tshering from Bhutan as vice-chairman while the Climate Change Division Director-General, Irfan Tariq, has been elected as a Rapporteur.