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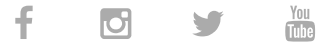
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NGAWANG JAMPHEL
Thimphu

The Sixteenth Meeting of the Governing Council (GC) of the South Asia Co-operative Environment Program (SACEP) was held from 24 June to 26, June 2024 in the capital.

The event, hosted by the Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources, saw senior officials and environment ministers from member states including Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. Representatives from international organizations and donors also attended as observers.

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The meeting commenced with the Preparatory Meeting of the National Focal Points (NFP) of the member states on 24 June and 25 June 2024. During these sessions, senior officials engaged in detailed discussions on various administrative, financial, and program matters about SACEP. The outcomes and recommendations from these preparatory meetings were then presented to the GC for adoption.

This session was attended by the environment ministers of the member states, who are key members of the GC. The meeting marked an important occasion for SACEP, reinforcing its mission to promote regional cooperation in South Asia on environmental issues within the context of sustainable development.

Established in 1982, SACEP has been instrumental in fostering regional cooperation among South Asian nations to address environmental challenges. The organization, headquartered in Colombo, Sri Lanka, aims to support the protection, management, and enhancement of the region's environment.

Over the years, SACEP has implemented numerous regional projects and programs covering a wide array of environmental concerns such as environmental education, legislation, biodiversity, air pollution, climate change, waste management, plastic management, and coastal environment protection.

The GC is the principal review and deliberative body of SACEP, responsible for determining its policies, strategies, and programs. The council comprises the environment ministers of the member countries, who convene periodically to make decisions of strategic importance. The meetings are hosted by member countries in alphabetical order.

As the host of the 16th meeting, the Royal Government of Bhutan held the chair position with its environment minister presiding over the sessions.

The significance of the 16th GC meeting lay not only in reviewing ongoing initiatives but also in setting future directions for SACEP's activities. Key agenda items included discussions on enhancing regional collaboration, developing new projects, and

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strengthening existing programs to address emerging environmental challenges.

The meeting also focused on improving administrative and financial mechanisms to ensure the effective implementation of SACEP's mandate.

One of the highlights of the meeting was the presentation of the progress report on SACEP's ongoing projects. This report detailed the achievements and challenges faced in various environmental domains, such as the successful reduction of air pollution levels in urban areas and significant strides in biodiversity conservation. The member participants reviewed these achievements and provided guidance on overcoming the identified challenges.

The GC also deliberated on new initiatives aimed at tackling pressing environmental issues in the region. Among these was a proposed regional strategy for plastic waste management, which has become a critical concern for all member states.

The strategy aims to promote sustainable practices, enhance waste management infrastructure, and foster public awareness about the detrimental effects of plastic pollution.

In addition to environmental projects, the meeting emphasized the importance of integrating environmental considerations into socio-economic development plans. This holistic approach is intended to ensure that economic growth in the region does not come at the expense of environmental degradation. The ministers discussed ways to enhance cooperation with international organizations and donors to support this integrated approach.

The 16th GC meeting concluded with the adoption of key resolutions and decisions, which will guide SACEP's activities in the coming years. The ministers expressed their commitment to working collaboratively to address the environmental challenges facing South Asia and to support sustainable development in the region.

As the meeting drew to a close, Bhutan handed over the chairmanship to the next host country, continuing the tradition

of rotational leadership that ensures equitable participation among member states.

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