

'Environmental conservation — the critical issue'

Full text of the address
by Rukman Senanayake,
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ment priorities. We should consider meeting the basic needs of people, including water, electricity, sanitation, education, transport, housing and employment, all of which are in the perception of many of our citizens equally as important as environmental conservation. About half Sri Lankan households still lack electricity; the situation as regards water and sanitation is much the same. To what extent can we compromise the provision of these basic needs with environmental conservation?

At the Rio summit ten years ago, we all accepted the fact that the future viability of the planet depends to a large extent on our ability to maintain a balance between resources and people. To achieve this balance, we adopted Agenda 21, the programme of action for global sustainability, in 1992.

Now, after the passage of a decade, the Political Declaration and Plan of Implementation adopted by the World Summit on Sustainable Development have renewed global commitment to sustainable development in the framework of Agenda 21.

We all are aware that the implementation of these measures is a near insurmountable task. I congratulate UNEP for taking steps to address these important issues. During this session, we are going to discuss measures for implementing the recommendations of World Summit on Sustainable Development. I have no doubt UNEP is well placed to lead the world towards sustainable development. The Program should be commended for its initiative in developing and helping successfully to implement a large number of important international conventions, protocols and treaties related to the environment. These treaties have already created the framework and paved the way to global sustainable development. However, we the countries have the biggest responsibility in this respect: we have to generate the dedication and the enthusiasm to lead the way by implementing our international commitments.

It is a pleasure for me to be able to go on record and inform you that Sri Lanka has kept all its obligations in terms of these commitments. We will continue to do so in the future, too. While progressing forward with these international obligations and the commitments, Sri Lanka has also adhered to its regional obligations as a concerned and sensitive neighbour within the nations of the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation.

Strong tradition

Sri Lanka has a strong tradition of promoting friendship and co-operation on international issues, at both the regional and the global levels. Historically, our ancestors have practiced the noble concept of sharing with neighbours, especially with regard to sharing common resources. For centuries before the term "sustainability" was invented, our society lived sustainably. All this has now changed, given the imperatives of development, a steadily growing population with new expectations. Today, we need to focus with all seriousness on the global trend of over-exploitation of resources to meet the greed of a handful of people.

I wish to report to you, what we have done in Sri Lanka to meet national and global commitments towards sustainable development. Our government has undertaken a major new initiative called Regaining Sri Lanka. This explicitly illustrates our path to sustainable development. Regaining Sri Lanka states, and I quote, that "natural resources development needs to be addressed in terms of renewable resources, non-renewable resources, and



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other miscellaneous environmental issues, while being mindful of improving and maintaining environmental integrity". The Ministries of the Government of Sri Lanka have now uniformly internalised sustainable development principles into their missions.

Action Plan

We have developed a series of national policy documents and action plans to address environmental issues. These include a National Conservation Strategy, national environmental and biodiversity action plans, national forestry and wildlife policies, a solid waste management strategy in 2000 and the Climate Change Action Plan.

We also have established a Biodiversity Secretariat, a Climate Change Secretariat, a Conventions Reference Centre, a National Air Resources Management Centre, and National Clean Development Mechanism Centre within the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources in order to strengthen institutional capacity.

In order to demonstrate our solidarity with the global community, Sri Lanka has ratified most of major international environmental conventions and protocols, such as the Framework Convention on Climate Change, the Basel Convention, the Convention on Biological Diversity, the Vienna Convention, the Montreal Protocol, the Biosafety Protocol and the Kyoto Protocol.

Sri Lanka does not produce ozone-depleting substances, and we use relatively small amounts of CFCs in our refrigerators and vehicle air conditioners. We have planned to phase out CFCs altogether by 2005, five years ahead of the protocol target for countries operating under Article 5. My government has already taken steps to control the import of ozone-depleting substances through new regulations. Regulations are also in place for controlling imports of used items containing CFCs. Sri Lanka was proud to host the 13th meeting of the Parties to the Montreal Protocol (MOP 13) in 2001. In keeping with this spirit of responsibility, we have taken a series of important steps towards playing our part in the global effort to protect the ozone layer, exceeding even our committed target.

Sri Lanka has always maintained that a global and regional approach is the best way of addressing international environmental concerns. Therefore, I am pleased to report that Sri Lanka has hosted the South Asian Corporate Environment Program during last 20-year period. This underlines Sri Lanka's commitment towards the promotion of regional and international co-operation.

We believe that if we all join in building a better environment for tomorrow, we can help find solutions to many of the social and economic problems that face us. We therefore have to work co-operatively as partners in the global community. UNEP can play a vital role in reinforcing the strong bond that holds us together. Let us strive towards a cleaner environment through working together to build a better tomorrow not just for ourselves, but the future of mankind. I am confident that given UNEP's steadfast determination and the solidarity demonstrated by its member countries, we will not fail in this endeavour.

As we set out to the scale ever-greater heights in the 21st century, the most critical issue the world faces today is environmental conservation. Shrinking forest cover, falling water tables, soil erosion, climate change, ozone-layer depletion, loss of biodiversity, desertification, drought, floods, air pollution, and water pollution have become seemingly insurmountable problems. Added to this is the problem of increasing consumerism, both as a result of development and growing population.

So great is the magnitude of these threats, which are universal in nature, that no individual nation, be it developed or developing, could address them in isolation.

World output expanded by 4.8 per cent in 2000, compared to 3.5 per cent in 1999. The average global per capita income has passed five thousand US dollars per year — that is 2.6 times that of 1950, in real terms. Nevertheless, more than one thousand three hundred million people still live on less than a dollar a day.

Total global emissions of carbon dioxide reached a new high of nearly 23,900 million tonnes in 1996, which is nearly four times the 1950 total. The UNEP warns that if present consumption pattern continues, two out of three persons on earth will live in water-stressed conditions by the year 2025. Indeed, my own country, Sri Lanka, is only slightly above the acceptable threshold.

Climate Change is no more in the realm of speculation: it is here for all of us to see. According to the latest findings of the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change, the global average surface temperature has increased by about 0.6 degrees Celsius over the 20th century. What is more, it is projected to increase by a further 1.4 to 5.8 degrees Celsius over the period 1990 to 2100.

The global mean sea level is also projected to rise by 9 and 88 centimetres between 1990 and 2100. Being an island, Sri Lanka could be among the nations worst affected by climate change. Our corals are being bleached. Our coastal lands are being gradually submerged to the sea. Our agricultural crop yield is threatened: particularly in rice, tea, coconut and rubber, which are mainstays of our economy. Frequent extreme weather events — whether flood or draught — cause serious damage to property and life.

The harvest of misfortune we are reaping today is the result of the seeds we ourselves have sown. As our populations grow, we construct more housing and develop yet more infrastructure. Ever-expanding agriculture results in yet greater demand for land, and ever-increasing threats to forests. In turn, deforestation contributes to variations in local weather patterns. We need to realize above all that it takes courage to honestly tell the peoples of our countries that unless we ensure sustainable development processes today, the welfare of future generations will be jeopardized.

Poverty

Eradication of poverty is another great challenge faced by us today. Many governments experience the growing tensions between the claims of sound environmental management, and those of develop-