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Policies and Perspectives of Environmental Management
in Asia and the Pacific

ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES IN THE 1990s
(Item 4 of the provisional agenda)

POLICY STATEMENT

By

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Mr. Chairman, Honourable Ministers, Excellencies,
distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen,

First, let me extend my warm congratulations to you, Mr. Chairman, on your election to preside over this Ministerial-level Conference on Environment and Development in Asia and the Pacific. This eloquently attests to your long experience and dedication to the cause of environmental protection and management. My colleagues and I are particularly pleased to see you in the chair, Excellency, after receiving the benefits of your guidance and support in organizing this important Conference. I also wish to congratulate the other members of the bureau. Their collective wisdom and able stewardship will, I am sure, steer our deliberations to a successful conclusion.

Mr. Chairman, the environmental challenges confronting us in the 1990s are formidable and highly complex. Persistent mass poverty, dwindling natural resources, the threats of global warming and a depleted ozone layer, plus the unrelenting pollution of land, air and water pose a staggering array of environmental problems that urgently demand suitable responses. Indeed, our region's vast range of ecosystems and large population base compound the complexities. Meanwhile, the emergence of a new synthesis that combines environmental advocacy with efforts

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for economic growth holds out promise of a much sounder approach to meeting such problems. To move toward taking advantage of this much improved strategy is, as you are aware, a chief reason for this Conference.

Let us first take a brief look at the troubling environmental decline taking place in our region, where 56 per cent of the world's peoples are struggling to progress and develop in less than a quarter of the earth's total land area. With our 2.9 billion population growing by 1.8 per cent a year, the environmental impact is strongest in rural areas where some 70 per cent of the region's population derive a livelihood from their natural surroundings. Rapid depletion of the region's rich base of natural resources is among the most serious environmental threats. In the latter half of the 1980s, estimates of the region's annual rate of deforestation more than doubled from 2 million hectares to an alarming 5 million. Desertification, meanwhile, affects more than 860 million hectares of land and some 150 million people. Eighty per cent of the region's wetlands face moderate to severe threats, and about 68 per cent of original wildlife habitats have been lost, with large numbers of plant and animal species having become rare or threatened.

In the region's still largely agricultural economy,

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keeping gains in food production abreast with population growth has been achieved mainly through heavier use of agrochemicals and the clearing of forest areas. Agrochemical use more than doubled, to 46 million tons, between 1977 and 1987, with pesticide consumption also rising. But the grim side effects of intensive agriculture and use of agrochemicals have been widespread deterioration of the region's land and water resources.

Rapid industrialization and exports accounted for much of the region's dynamic average growth of almost 7 per cent in the 1980s, but the uneven income distribution therefrom failed to alleviate the chronic poverty afflicting more than a quarter of the region's population. Recent trends in energy consumption show a shift toward solid fuels and extensive use of fuelwood for household needs. Both of course increase emissions of air pollutants. Meanwhile, the region's rapid urbanization, with primate cities often growing fastest, tends to generate spatial polarization, economic dualism, social inequity and diseconomies of scale. Proliferating slums in many major Asian cities are one painful consequence. So are urban congestion, pollution and severe strains on social and physical infrastructure.

Mr. Chairman, today's environmental challenges in our

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region and elsewhere will require difficult decisions, and the World Commission on Environment and Development was fully mindful of that. The World Commission's holistic concept, called environmentally sound and sustainable development, means a kind of development that meets present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs as well. This new synthesis entails not only the management of the environment but also of human activities that significantly affect the environment. It enlarges the notion of development to embrace the enhancement of environmental quality -- and with this the quality of life -- and extends it to cover development over the long term on a sustainable basis. In our region's context, sustainable development demands equity between and within generations, and also within nations. But attaining such equity will require fundamental changes in both the development process and environmental perceptions. Thus, this new synthesis demands making difficult choices.

Meeting basic human needs is the suitable starting point for sustainable development where poverty is pervasive. But poverty and underdevelopment are also closely associated with many environmental problems. These include denuded forests, soil degradation, lost productivity and disrupted /ecosystems,

ecosystems, stemming variously from the poor's fuel demands, marginal farming practices or resulting from ignorance, disease or hunger. Policies to break this pernicious cycle should address root causes such as landlessness and inequitable access to natural resources, inadequate access to education, capital, technology or even health care, improper pricing of natural resources, deteriorating terms of trade and unfavourable trade policies, and heavy debt burdens. Rapid population growth should also be addressed in cases where excessiveness worsens the poverty problem.

Although more than two-thirds of the region's population remains rural today, urban growth rates of 3 to 5 per cent foretell ever larger cities and increasingly critical environmental problems. Indeed, deteriorating urban living conditions are already evident in the losing battles many large cities appear to be waging against infrastructural deficiencies, monstrous traffic jams, various forms of pollution including waste disposal, substandard housing for many citydwellers, and general congestion. Human settlements policies should give priority to decentralizing urbanization and to ensuring that urban and rural development are integrated and harmonized. Deeply concerned, the Commission this year decided to convene in 1992 a Regional

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Conference on Urbanization Strategies in the ESCAP Region: Towards Environmentally Sound and Sustainable Development and Management of Urban Areas. The secretariat is to assess this alarming problem, develop a regional action plan and prepare a framework for formulating national action plans for managing urban development without environmental damage.

To help arrest their depletion, the region's natural resources need to be clearly recognized as productive assets and their use taken into account accordingly in national income accounting procedures. Governments could thus avoid serious distortions between gains and losses in economic valuations. The linkage between economic and environmental changes, as could be shown in separate resources accounts, would point the way toward the goal of quantifying what we might call sustainable GNP, to assist in decision making for development. Moreover, natural resources are usually exported as raw materials, at prices that do not reflect the full social environmental costs involved in their exploitation. This suggests a need to carefully review trade and investment policies to ensure compatibility with sustainable development.

Industrialization is vital for continued growth in a region with burgeoning population, limited land and a

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shrinking resource base. But policies encouraging industrial growth should also guard against its becoming unsustainable. Existing industries should be required to minimize pollution by installing treatment facilities when necessary and/or changing process design, while new industries should be located in well-equipped industrial estates outside metropolitan areas. Sustainable industrialization and industrial restructuring are high on the agenda of a Meeting of Ministers of Industry and Technology in our region to be held in 1991 or soon thereafter.

Balancing energy needs with environmental concerns involves especially difficult policy decisions. Though relatively cheap energy spurred growth in the developed countries, such patterns of energy use need re-examination if development is to be sustained. Two aspects of the energy-environment relationship in particular that policies should address are the environmental implications and impact of large energy systems and of the rural poor's traditional fuel. Conservation and efficiency should be major aims in energy policies, we feel, plus technological advances to enable wider use of renewable energy sources.

The World Commission on Environment and Development noted that achieving sustainable development will require

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changing the ways that grass-roots citizens regard and treat the environment. Intensified environmental education will be needed, especially at the primary level. The media and NGOs can also do much to promote environmental awareness and responsible behaviour. Institutional and legal reforms are also needed to underpin sustainable development, especially new legislation to combat the root causes of environmental despoliation. A coinciding review of existing laws could lead to a time-phased programme aimed at a desired target of environmental quality.

High among current global concerns, as you are aware, are depletion of the stratosphere's ozone layer, stemming mainly from emissions of chlorofluorocarbons or CFCs, and the worrisome prospect of global warming due to growing atmospheric concentrations of carbon dioxide, methane and other greenhouse gases. Only joint international action can prevent further damage to the ozone layer. Yet the disconcerting fact is that only nine countries in our region have ratified the 1987 Montreal Protocol.

These global problems will worsen the region's environmental degradation, and rising sea level could be an especially grave calamity for many small island nations. There will be difficult choices, as with energy amid global

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climatic change. Still, Asian-Pacific countries should go on participating actively in IPCC, strongly promote energy conservation and efficiency and step up efforts for large-scale afforestation.

The World Commission stressed that developing countries will need massive assistance if global sustainability is to be accomplished. Though they themselves bear the responsibility for achieving sustainable development, the unavoidable reality is that many developing countries lack capital as well as technical and management capabilities. Last June the parties to the Montreal Protocol agreed to set up a 160-million-dollar fund to help developing countries build industries not reliant on ozone-depleting chemicals. Though encouraging, this would cover a very limited yet important aspect of environmental problems.

In our region, a framework is needed to enable launching action programmes to promote environmentally sound and sustainable development, as will arise when you consider adopting a regional strategy as recommended by the meeting of senior officials. An important dimension of course would be co-operative regional-level action in various areas and directions that your decisions would largely determine. However, as you know, such decisions mean little without

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funding. Thus your directions for follow-up activities will naturally require resources contributed by Governments and agencies so as to undertake and sustain efforts during the time frame of the strategy. Their availability would largely determine the extent of strategy-related technical assistance, training, regional analyses and studies, advisory services and intercountry projects since the secretariat's resources are inadequate to even attempt any such implementation.

Broader regional co-operation could also be much help in confronting the environmental challenges of the 1990s. One viable option, I feel, would be for the ministers to meet as often as feasible, but at least once every five years and to set up an Intergovernmental Committee of Senior Officials on Environment and Development. Such a committee could likewise assess environmental conditions and trends, periodically update the state of the environment report, monitor implementation of action programmes emerging here, and report to the Commission. Your recommendations will certainly be taken into account in finalizing my report to the Commission next year on a critical review of its overall conference structure.

To improve co-ordination, a proposal has been made for

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an Interagency Committee on Environment and Development, comprising representatives of relevant United Nations agencies, multilateral funding organizations and bilateral aid agencies. This could provide a periodic forum for exchanging information and co-ordinating programmes and activities. In keeping with the coordinating role assigned to it by the UN General Assembly, ESCAP will be pleased to coordinate and offer secretariat services for this purpose.

Mr. Chairman, we face a decade of difficult decisions. The holistic concept of environmentally sound and sustainable development provides us the soundest approach yet to development, and also reinforces, I am sure, our commitment to environmentalism. But the choices are hard ones, as with the demand for equity between present and future generations. Difficult too are the changes in the development process and in environmental perceptions and human behaviour and attitudes. Mustering strong commitment and large-scale participation by Governments, the private sector, NGOs and the media will not be easy either, though regional activities could help substantially. The vital point to be kept in view is that this new environmental lexicon of sustainable development is not now -- and should never be allowed to become -- an empty slogan. We can continue to opt for the

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old easy choices and fail miserably in the end, as the environment's decline is already showing us today. Or we can face up to the difficult decisions that both the current situation and sustainable development dictate, thereby creating a new beginning and laying the foundations for a sustainable future, for our grandchildren and their grandchildren. The decision is yours.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.