

Asia-Pacific Regional Action Programme on Air Pollution

Regional Workshop for South Asia

Kathmandu, 09:30-10:00, 9 December 2024

OPENING REMARKS BY H. E. MR. MD. GOLAM SARWAR, SECRETARY- GENERAL OF SAARC

Hon'ble Ain Bahadur Shahi Thakuri, Minister for Forests and Environment, Government of Nepal,

Representative of UNFP,

Ms. Mikiko Tanaka, Director and Head, South and South-West Asia Office, ESCAP,

Distinguished delegates,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good Morning!

1. At the outset, I would like to thank the Ministry of Forests and Environment of the Government of Nepal and the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) for arranging this very important program and extending invitation to SAARC. It is indeed a great honour and privilege for me to deliver the Opening Remarks in this august gathering at the 'Regional Workshop for South Asia in support of the Asia-Pacific Regional Action Programme on Air Pollution (RAPAP).'

Air pollution in South Asia Region is a critical environmental and public health issue, affecting millions of people across countries like Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. According to the draft Concept Note for this workshop, and the data produced in it is deeply concerning. It says that, 60 per cent of the population in South Asia breathes in air that exceeds the World Health Organization air quality standard. That means the lives and livelihoods of more than a half of SAARC's population are in danger due to inhalation of poor air.

The region has some of the world's most polluted cities, and the situation is worsening due to activities related to rapid urbanization, like Vehicular Emissions, Industrial Emissions, Construction Activities, Burning of biomass and Crop Particles, deforestation and climate change. Long-term exposure to air pollution, especially fine particulate matter (PM2.5), increases the risk of chronic diseases like asthma,

lung cancer, and heart disease. It is also a leading cause of premature deaths in South Asia. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), air pollution is responsible for millions of deaths annually in the region.

The healthcare costs of treating air pollution-related diseases are substantial. It also causes decrease of productivity due to poor health and environmental conditions and add on significant economic burden on the Governments and the people.

Air pollution leads to environmental degradation, affecting water bodies, vegetation, and wildlife. Smog and haze also harm ecosystems, including important agricultural land. Many pollutants in the region, such as black carbon contribute directly to climate change by absorbing sunlight and warming the atmosphere, which leads to unpredictable weather patterns, impacting agriculture, water resources, and biodiversity.

Under this backdrop, On behalf of SAARC, I would like to commend the initiative of the Government of Nepal and ESCAP for organizing this very important regional workshop and reaching out to SAARC in your efforts to operationalize the Asia-Pacific Regional Action Programme on Air Pollution (RAPAP).

Ladies and Gentlemen,

2. One of the main objectives of SAARC is to promote the welfare of the peoples of South Asia and to improve the quality of lives of one quarter of the global population living in the region. SAARC attaches high importance to fighting climate change and ensuring a clean, healthy and sustainable environment. Public health, energy, and environment are also in the priority list of SAARC. Of particular relevance to RAPAP, the Thimphu Statement on Climate Change is one of the most important initiatives of SAARC to deal with the ever evolving threats caused by the Environment due to Climate Change. About a week ago, the SAARC Member States reviewed the status of its implementation and recommended a roadmap for the way forward. The Member States discussed exchange of best practices to scale up efforts to implement the Thimphu Statement. Couple of best practices worthy of admiration is Nepal's Community Forestry Programme (CFP) and introduction of Electric Vehicle in the Country. CFP has significantly increased Nepal's forest cover and the EVs are helping the reduction of carbon emission, thereby improving air quality in the country to a good extent. I would like to commend the Government of Nepal on these noble initiatives.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Air pollution is transboundary issue, which is causing hindrance in the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development for the countries of South Asia and beyond. Addressing air pollution in South Asia requires coordinated efforts across national governments, local authorities, industries, and the public. I am Confident that, Asia-Pacific Regional Action Programme on Air Pollution (RAPAP) will offer important platform and significant way forward for the region to improve air quality management, facilitate air quality monitoring, share open data, exchange best practices, support capacity building, and mobilize further multilateral cooperation in this field.

3. The SAARC Secretariat is currently working on updating the MoU with ESCAP. We, in the SAARC, welcome the opportunity to engage with ESCAP and other regional and multilateral stakeholders to contribute in improving the lives and livelihood of the people of South Asia. SAARC also looks forward to working with ESCAP to strengthen regional cooperation and integration in the interest of the people of Asia and the Pacific.

4. To conclude, I once again thank the Government of Nepal and ESCAP for arranging this workshop and I wish a productive and successful outcome of this event.

Thank you!