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Closing Address

By

Nazmul Huda
SPEECH FOR SOUTH ASIA ENVIRONMENTAL JOURNALIST WORKSHOP

HON. NAZMUL HUDA
Minister For Information, Bangladesh

Ladies and Gentlemen,
Representative of the AMIC, The Asia Foundation and Devfeature,

I am delighted, indeed honoured, to be able to attend the concluding ceremony of the Workshop on Environmental Writing on South Asia. The significance of the workshop is to share the South Asian environmental issues and experience with the resource persons and the participants.

I am happy to be with the environmental journalists from India, Maldives, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. I understand that the participants have benefited tremendously from the five-day workshop jointly organized by Asian Mass Communication Research And Information Centre (AMIC) and The Asia Foundation in coordination with Devfeature.

Such workshop of the South-Asian environmental journalists in Dhaka is significant because, you can ventilate the views of our environmental concern to the north. Which will indeed exert pressure on them to listen to us. Media has to play the lead in sensitizing the environmental issue to the public in general, as well as encourage social mobilization of the concerned citizens of the country in initiating peoples-participation in tackling environmental problems. In the past the environmental journalists have effectively raised public policy issues.

Ladies and Gentlemen. Today the West’s describe South Asia as a region of acute poverty and intermittent visitation by natural calamities. Less than 300 years ago, it was one of the world’s most urbanized and richest regions which attracted traders from all over the world. This wealth was built upon the sustained use of local natural resources which was governed through extensive management systems in which both local communities and the state played critical roles.

The extraordinary ecological diversity of the region – ranging from the cold deserts of the Karakoram and Ladakh to the hot sandy desert of the Thar, from the high mountain temperate forests of the Himalaya to the lush tropical forests and vast mangroves of Bangladesh, Indian, and Sri Lanka and from the sharply dissected mountain lands of Nepal and Bhutan to the encroaching flood-prone plains of Bangladesh, India, Pakistan gave rise to an equally extraordinary cultural diversity which embodied within it rich traditions of ecological management and resource use.
In large parts of the region, however, colonialism and subsequent centralized intervention completely disrupted and transformed the local economic, ecological and cultural systems and left the region in a state of all round impoverishment.

Economic development of the last four decades also did not take into account either people's own wisdom about their natural resources nor did it hand them back power to manage their environment. The result has been continued exploitation of the resource base without any discipline or care for future impacts.

Ladies and Gentlemen. Environment problems does not have international boundaries. The South Asian nations must jointly tackle the environmental problems from the past experience. People's participation at levels of planning and implementation will definitely help resolve the environmental problems.

Quickly touching some issues in Bangladesh. The government have already identified poverty as the number one environmental threat. Despite Bangladesh having rich natural resources, these resources are being over-exploited for poverty.

On the other hand, many environmentalists do not take into consideration of women and children dying in thousands every year due to drinking polluted water. The reason is simple. Poverty has forced the rural people to defecate in open places which pollutes the water sources. Bangladesh experience 79 million diarrhoeal episodes in children under-5 years age and 3 lakh (300,000) children die due to diarrhoea. Though the usage of tubewells for drinking purposes is high in the rural areas, the users do not use tubewell water for all domestic purposes.

Children are the most vulnerable be it natural calamities, environmental problems, industrial disasters or even during economic debt. Many environmentalists does not take into consideration of women and children dying in thousands every year due to drinking polluted water.

You are all aware that Bangladesh is intermittently visited by natural disasters which have not only threatened the economy and development but has also caused environment and ecological problems. Floods, for example, have caused enough miseries to the people, but Bangladesh believes that it could be resolved at the regional level. I understand the participants have discussed the Flood Action Plan. The Hon'able Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia urged the implementation agency responsible for the Flood Action Plan for the involvement of people's participation in the planning, designing and implementation of the projects meant for the benefit of the people.
Meanwhile, Bangladesh have initiated a regional water resource management plan with its South Asian neighbours namely, India, Nepal and Bhutan where the headwaters originate. This plan will definitely lessen the impacts of the flood in the Monsoon as well as augment water flow during the dry season.

For no fault of us, Bangladesh will be a victim of the predicted global warming. There are enough scientific evidence that one-third of Bangladesh will submerge under saline water with a one-metre sea level rise. The case of Maldives is the worse. The sea level rise will drown the picturesque nation totally. So is the case of the south coastal areas of India. If we are not to be blamed then blame whom? Obviously the northern countries are responsible for the predicted global warming and they must reduce damaging the fragile earth atmosphere. They must pay compensation for causing miseries to the South Asian nations. We must jointly voice our demands at the Earth Summit scheduled to be held at Brazil in June next.

The democratic government of Bangladesh has already prepared a country paper to be presented at the UNCED Heads of State conference at Rio, Brazil in June next. Our Hon able Prime Minister is scheduled to attend the Earth Summit. The country paper has involved a cross section of people, NGOs and academicians to review the draft document. Similar is the case with the Environment Policy and National Conservation Strategy. In every activities people concerned in environmental issues have been involved in the preparation of the documents.

I thank the organizers of the workshop, particularly AMIC, for being thoughtful of organizing it in Bangladesh.

Khoda Hafeez.