

Facing the challenge of environment

As I speak before this august gathering today, the earth's forests are shrinking, its deserts expanding and its soils eroding — all taking place at record rates. Every year thousands of plant and animal species disappear from this planet of ours before they are even named. Evidence accumulating over the last five years shows that the earth's temperature has begun an upward climb posing a threat of unknown dimensions to practically all the life support systems on which human civilization exists.

Changes in the chemistry of the atmosphere like air pollution, acid rain, ozone depletion and the build up of greenhouse gases, have drawn the attention of scientists and aroused concern among peoples and governments. The environmental consequences of these climate changes have led to deepening fears, particularly among low lying countries where rising sea level could be extremely costly.

The two recent floods which caused havoc in Bangladesh have raised new perceptions of the impact on environment caused by human activity. As an outcome of that awareness an international seminar was held in Dhaka early March on the regional and global environmental perspectives of the floods in Bangladesh. At that seminar organized by the Bangladesh Research Bureau and participated by eminent scientists from around the world I suggested that an International Institute for Environmental Studies and Disaster Management should be set up in Dhaka. I am happy that the suggestion had been accepted through the Dhaka Declaration adopted at the seminar and the Institute has come into being.

I am very pleased with the presence of the distinguished members of the Board of Advisers of the Institute. We are honoured to have among us Professor Abdus Salam, Nobel

Laureate and Director of the International Centre for Theoretical Physics in Trieste. His dedication to the spread of science and technology in the developing countries as the President of the Third World Academy of Sciences is well known. I am sure his presence here today will contribute immensely to the future growth of the nascent Institute.

There has been tremendous progress in science and technology in the last few decades of the outgoing century. But unfortunately the impact of this progress on the environment has not been fully realized. It is only recently that the perceptions of the relation between human activity and environmental degradation are becoming pronounced. Five years ago, a disaster like famine in Africa was attributed to drought conditions exclusively. But the spectre of famine that looms large over parts of Africa today is the outcome of a mixture of politics, economic compulsions and the worsening relationship between rapidly growing populations and the natural systems on which they depend.

Bangladesh went through unprecedented miseries with the recurrence of devastating floods, cyclones, tornadoes, tidal surges and drought which ravaged the countryside, destroyed people's homes and their means of livelihood. The time has come to ask whether these disasters are not the result of man's treatment of nature. The periodic recurrence of floods interspersed with droughts in Bangladesh should spur us into actions to prevent the decline of the quality of the environment.

In facing up to the challenge

of environmental degradation, we are, in fact, all on the same boat. Whether we are concerned with the destruction of forest in Europe by acid rain or the accelerated siltation of rivers in Bangladesh by deforestation in the Himalayan foothills, we are involved with the same basic environmental issues.

The earth is showing signs that its physical condition is deteriorating. Some of the readings include rapid deforestation spreading desertification and the erosion of soils. The ozone layer in the upper atmosphere which protects the earth's surface from ultraviolet radiation is thinning. The temperatures on our planet are rising. The most disconcerting feature is that the declines of some life support systems have been speeded up. This is partly due to the explosive growth of population in many regions of the world.

Five years ago the so-called "greenhouse" effect caused by the excessive accumulation of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere through the burning of fossil fuels was a widely accepted theory. But the actual warming up of the earth was viewed as a remote possibility.

Today evidences are emerging that the earth is actually warming and nobody can say for sure what will be the consequences of this global phenomenon. Scientists warn that besides carbon dioxide, other emissions like chlorofluorocarbons, nitrous oxide and methane are also contributing to the warming. We thought that the

depletion of the ozone layer due to chlorofluorocarbon will not materialize until some time well into the next century. Time has proved how wrong we were. The rise in sea level poses the problem of enhanced inundation globally. It could take up as much as 30 per cent of the arable land of Bangladesh.

The government of Bangladesh is deeply concerned over environmental degradation and has given stress on the ecological impact of development planning. The role of science and technology in economic progress of the country is well recognized but we are constantly in search for an environmentally safe technology. We are also making efforts to lessen the impact of natural disasters. A National Disaster Prevention Council has been formed comprising representatives from different disciplines and walks of life with expert sub-committees and these are functioning. After last year's catastrophic floods I personally undertook visits to the neighbouring capitals to boost a regional approach to face the challenge of natural disasters like floods. Several joint task forces have been set up with regional countries to study the problem of floods and they have also started their work.

Response from the international community to Bangladesh's efforts to face the floods has been extremely encouraging. I would like to especially thank His Excellency Mr Javier Perez

de Cuellar, Secretary General of the United Nations, for his personal initiatives at the UN to mitigate the sufferings of the Bangladesh people. He demonstrated his sense of solidarity with the flood stricken people by visiting Bangladesh last March and apprising himself of the disaster management programme.

Because of the frequent occurrence of natural disasters in this country, it is imperative that Bangladesh take an action programme in this respect. With such an end in view the International Institute for Environmental Studies and Disaster Management was conceived. The location of the institute is very appropriate. Because of its geographical position, Bangladesh offers some unique opportunities for studying certain environmental situations like flow of rivers and geoclimatic processes taking place in the coastal region. Scientists from all over the world working in the Institute's multidisciplinary units will get a close view of these environmental phenomena.

I am sure the Institute will make valuable contributions to environmental research and make us more knowledgeable about ecological disasters for planning. I am really pleased to be associated with the Institute as Chief Patron. I am certain that the Institute will receive support from all quarters so that it quickly grows into a major research body.

The government has sanctioned land for the Institute and I am happy that the scientific community in Bangladesh has come forward and accepted the challenge of organizing it. We are all living in a global

village. The health of the earth's inhabitants cannot be separated from that of the planet itself. When this awareness is growing I am hopeful that this new Institute will get all kinds of help from around the world. I appeal to all governments and international organizations to assist the Institute in contributing to solutions to the global and regional environmental problems. The world must return to sustainable development and for this there must be international cooperation.

The United Nations sponsored conference in Helsinki this month on a joint effort to fight ozone depletion is an indication that the international community is getting together to tackle environmental issues.

We must remember that we are the first generation on this planet whose decisions will determine whether the earth remains habitable. There must be a groundswell of support globally for far reaching changes to reverse the trends which threaten the future of our children.

NOTE

The article is based on excerpts from the speech by the President at the opening ceremony of the International Institute of Environmental Studies and Disaster Management in Dhaka on Thursday.