

KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY GUEST OF HONOUR:

H.E. General C. S. Weerasooriya
High Commissioner
High Commission of the Democratic
Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka

The Chief Guest, Dr. Ishfaq Ahmad,
Dr. Hameed Ahmed Khan,
Executive Director, COMSATS,
Excellencies,
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am honored to be invited to the inaugural session of COMSATS 1st Meeting on “Water-Resources for Sustainable Development”. It is my great pleasure to address subject experts from countries of the South, in the face of water insecurity.

I am indeed happy to speak a few words on this important subject because, in Sri Lanka an ancient civilization emerged and flourished on the river banks of the country’s dry zone. Settlements quickly spread across the plains prompting an urgent need for a means of coping with the geological and geographical peculiarities of the dry zone and its frequent droughts. Thus, Sri Lanka became one of the greatest irrigation civilizations of the ancient world.

Large-scale irrigation networks began crisscrossing the parched landscape, which started as early as the first century A.D. Sri Lanka’s engineers utilized the waters of the Mahaweli ganga, the longest river in Sri Lanka, and the other rivers that flowed down to the plains from the mountains of the wet zone.

The construction of their canals and channels exhibited an amazing in-depth knowledge of trigonometry; and the design of their reservoirs revealed a thorough grasp of hydraulic principles. The method of regulating the flow of water from these tanks, as the artificial lake reservoirs are called today, was ingenious. By the third century B.C. Sri Lankan engineers had invented the BISOKOTUWA (valvepit), the prototype of sluices regulating the flow of water from contemporary reservoirs.

It is highly interesting to mention that in the 1980’s when Sri Lanka started work on the accelerated Mahaweli programme, under which water of Mahaweli River is diverted to the dry zone, it was found that there had been an ancient irrigation network exactly in the manner designed by modern engineers.

The world is rapidly moving toward shortages of freshwater, both on the surface and underneath the Earth. Globally water-usage has increased fivefold in this century, and today’s per-capita availability is predicted to decline by a third over the next generation. Water shortages are rapidly emerging, even in water-rich countries from the United States to China; recent droughts in South Asia and North Africa have emphasized the precarious balance between water supply and demand.

Water is a strategic asset for the countries of the South, most of whom are agro-based economies, and thrive on the optimum yield of crops. Hence water is a key factor for sustainable development.

Change in climatic cycles and rain-belts, depleting aquifers, salination and water-logging impress upon us the need to better manage the endowed resource, which is becoming a scarce element in the face of population explosion. Water as basic amenity of life, especially fresh, uncontaminated-potable water is available to a very small portion of world populace.

With changing life-styles and usage-pattern, the access to water is further getting out of the reach of the rural habitants, coastal and marine life is facing challenging scenarios, maintaining biodiversity is becoming an up-hill task, contamination by fertilizers and pesticides, dumping of municipal and industrial wastewater into rivers and lakes, solid waste deposits along river banks, and uncontrolled seepage from unsanitary landfills--all these factors are degrading freshwater-resources and imposing

health risks, especially for children, the primary victims of waterborne diseases.

The need of the hour is to focus on the water-issues at a much broader level; deploy water-management plans to conserve and optimize water-resources, use water-efficient products, techniques and technologies, sensitize much needed public opinion to make the resource available to all segments of societies, impartially.

Sri Lanka being an island country, does not face a water-management crisis, though there are signs of increasing stress on water-resources and competition between users. Lower river levels and increasing salinity intrusion into the Kelani River mouth is threatening the entire water-supply to Greater Colombo, an area of 730 Sq. Km.

The government of Sri Lanka has initiated a number of steps to strengthen gainfully its water-resources management and, with help of Asian Development Bank, had sometime back, embarked upon Institutional Strengthening for Comprehensive Water-Resources Management (ISCWRM) project. It is in line with the emphasis on water-policy and institutional development and on the need for a comprehensive, water-sector approach to sustainable development. The project addresses the entire water-sector in Sri Lanka, including irrigation, water supply, hydropower, and environment aspects. It follows a five-point action-plan, which along with others

include the development of integrated river-basin planning.

It will also be worth mentioning that IUCN Sri Lanka, established in 1988, has provided considerable support to national initiatives for the sustainable management of biodiversity and for enhancing local capacity for environmental management. I would also like to add that Muthurajawela Wetland Project is the largest saline coastal peat-bog of Sri Lanka and is listed as one of the 12 priority wetlands of the island due to its rich biodiversity. An ecological survey on the Muthurajawela march sanctuary has been in operation, in order to identify its critical habitats.

Although Sri Lanka is signatory to water-related global projects, much is still needed at regional level to mutually tackle the present and future challenges, and make use of each other's experiences.

I greatly value the outcome of the deliberations of this meeting, for which COMSATS has convened this august conference for furthering the cause of water-resources for sustainable development in the countries of the South. The findings of the meeting will hopefully go a long way in addressing the issues to gainful utilization of these resources in the future.

Thank you.