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FAO REGIONAL CONFERENCE FOR ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

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Statement by the Director-General

Excellency Mr. Dato' Sri Ahmad Shabery Cheek, Minister of Agriculture and Agro-Based Industry of Malaysia, and elected Chair of the Thirty-third FAO Regional Conference for Asia and Pacific;

Excellency Mr. Khaltmaa Battulga, Minister for Industry and Agriculture of Mongolia, and outgoing Chair of the FAO Regional Conference for Asia and Pacific;

Dear Ministers;

Excellencies;

Distinguished guests;

Colleagues of FAO;

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honour and great pleasure to be with you at this Regional Conference for Asia and the Pacific.

I would like to start by thanking again the welcome by the people of Malaysia for their support, hospitality and warm welcome.

FAO's Regional Conferences in 2016 coincide with the beginning of a new era in the international scenario: the era of the Sustainable Development Goals, the SDGs.

For FAO, the first two Sustainable Development Goals of ending extreme poverty and hunger by 2030 are the most important and ambitious commitments ever made in the history of the United Nations.

In fact, they are two enormous challenges and there are only 15 years to achieve them. But the latest results show that Asia and the Pacific region is on the right path in trying to overcome them.

By the end of 2015, this region had achieved the Millennium Development Goal of halving the proportion of people who suffer from hunger.

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During the period from 1990 to 1992, hungry people accounted for 24 percent of the population in Asia and the Pacific. It has now been reduced to 12 percent. Nineteen developing countries, out of the 27 that have been monitored by FAO in the region, have reached this MDG target.

The region has also achieved the largest reduction in the number of undernourished people: 236 (two hundred and thirty-six) million people were lifted from hunger. That is more than any other region in the world.

But we still have much work to do. Because this region also has more people than any other who are still suffering from hunger in the world.

In Asia and the Pacific, 490 (four hundred and ninety) million people still do not have enough to eat. In fact, the region is home to almost 62 percent of the world's chronically hungry people that means nearly 2 out of every 3 hungry people are in Asia and the Pacific.

This high number of undernourished people persists mainly because of access problems caused by a lack of purchasing power, a lack of good jobs, physical access and the limited coverage of social protection systems.

Nutritional indicators are seriously deficient in a number of countries in Asia-Pacific. Despite the significant progress made, the rate of child stunting is over 40 percent in several countries.

At the same time, childhood obesity in the region has increased, with some 18 million overweight children below the age of five.

Some of the Pacific Island states have particularly high rates of obesity and overweight, leading to an increased incidence of disease. According to W-H-O figures, more than 50 percent of the population in at least 10 Pacific island countries are overweight.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We must intensify our efforts to achieve Zero Hunger, end extreme poverty, improve nutrition and address impacts of climate change on food security.

But we must bear in mind that human and financial resources are scarce and that the 17 SDGs approved include 130 indicators and 169 targets. In this context, I ask countries to indicate their priorities to meet all targets.

FAO's collaboration can certainly be very useful in the area of data and statistics, which will be important for the process of monitoring and on SDG 1 and 2 and SDG 13 on climate change.

Some Asian countries have made significant efforts in the development and strengthening of social protection systems.

However, efforts still need to be made to make these systems more inclusive and shock-responsive. We have to be sure that key groups, including fisher folks, rural farmers and forest dependent communities are adequately covered and reached by social systems.

The agriculture sector is the largest employer in the developing countries of Asia and the Pacific. But smallholders, pastoralists, landless and marginal farmers, fisher folks and their families face a large number of economic, social and technical constraints.

As a result, the rapid economic growth of the region has not translated into higher productivity and incomes for many family farmers.

Strengthening the capacities of this target group to link to modern, pro-poor and inclusive value chains would offer them the opportunity to increase their agricultural output, improve their incomes and food security.

For 2016-17, FAO proposes, as priorities for the region, to continue focusing on and deepening our four Regional Initiatives launched in the last conference in 2014. They are:

(first) support to the Zero Hunger Challenge,

(second) the Regional Rice Initiative,

(third) Blue Growth Initiative, and

(fourth) Developing Local Value Chains in the Pacific Islands.

The Initiative on Zero Hunger Challenge will work to strengthen implementation at country level.

The Regional Rice Initiative will focus on improving rice productivity, creating synergies through integration through other sectors.

As for the Regional Initiative on Blue Growth, a closer integration of aquaculture with other sectors has been suggested to be improved for this biennium.

Finally the Regional Initiative on Value Chains for Food Security and Nutrition in the Pacific Islands is working to improve the capacity of local food producers to supply more food to domestic and tourist markets.

In addition, as you know, we will expand country-specific activities to assess the availability and quality of essential agricultural statistics under the Global Strategy to Improve Agricultural and Rural Statistics programme.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We know that, in absolute terms, Asia and the Pacific is the region most affected by natural disasters. FAO estimates that the impact of natural disasters on the agriculture sectors over the past 10 years has been around USD 28 billion dollars, equivalent of 40 percent of the total losses during the same period.

During the past biennium, FAO has continued to support countries during emergencies.

This work was very visible following the devastating earthquake in Nepal in 2015 and Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines in 2013.

We are adopting the same measures regarding Cyclone Winston, which has just caused a lot of damage in Fiji.

Now, more than ever, and as reiterated in the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, there is a need to go beyond just responding to these events.

FAO, through our Strategic Objective 5, to Increase Resilience has incorporated a much broader approach.

This enables the Organization to address Disaster Risk Reduction and resilience building in an innovative and reinvigorated approach

Animal health has also been high on the region's agenda. FAO has been at the front line in the control of avian influenza since its emergence in 2004.

FAO, through its animal health and other agricultural platforms is ideally placed to immediately support countries to address this issue.

Excellencies,

Another important agenda item for this Conference is the review of the Decentralized Offices Network.

FAO is seeking to update the coverage of its decentralized offices, in order to have more efficiency and, therefore, better conditions to support Member Countries.

As you know, this issue has been discussed by the Governing Bodies in Rome. Inputs from the Regional Conferences will be added to the document presented at the last Council session in December, for decision in the next session of the Council in May.

This is the first time that this theme has been discussed. I would like to draw your attention to this issue not only from a country perspective, but also bearing in mind the need to improve FAO's work in the region as a whole.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to conclude by emphasizing the importance of achieving sustainable development for a safer and more peaceful world.

There is no sustainable development without peace. And there is no peace without sustainable development.

And eradicating hunger is essential for achieving both sustainable development and peace.

The interdependence between food security and peace is very strong.

At the end of this month, I will address this issue in the United Nations Security Council and stress the strong relationship between conflict and hunger that we have been seeing in the last years.

FAO's message is that where there is conflict, there is hunger. And where there is hunger, there can be no lasting and true peace.

The right to adequate food is a human right for everyone. We believe that the Security Council should take action in this regard.

Freeing the world of the tyranny of hunger and poverty is the fight of everyone and for everyone. No one must be left behind.

Thank you for your attention.