

**FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ORGANIZATION
OF
THE UNITED NATIONS (FAO)**

**THE 34TH SESSION OF FAO REGIONAL CONFERENCE
FOR ASIA AND THE PACIFIC**

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Opening Statement

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Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific

**Honourable Minister for Agriculture, Rural & Maritime
Development & National Disaster Management &
Meteorological Services,**

Excellencies

Distinguished Delegates

Ladies and Gentlemen

Good morning!

It gives me great pleasure to extend to you all a very warm welcome to this Senior Officers Meeting of the 34th Session of the FAO Regional Conference for Asia and the Pacific.

We are grateful to you for accepting our invitation to this event and traveling all the way from your countries to experience beautiful Fiji. And therefore I am also very grateful to our host, the Government of Fiji for their warm hospitality and excellent arrangements for this conference and the close collaboration with us.

My colleagues and I have had the pleasure of meeting many of you on different occasions in your own countries, in FAO meetings and elsewhere. But this conference is special because it provides an excellent opportunity as a group to discuss priority policy and regulatory issues, FAO's work in the region and how we are operating and delivering results. It is, after all, your guidance that we seek as we move forward with our work this year and next.

We have a substantive agenda prepared in consultation with the representatives of the member countries in the region. It covers a wide range of very interesting, and also quite challenging issues relating to agriculture and food security. You have the agenda before you and so I won't waste time repeating it. But the issues we must deal with here are complex.

I believe you will agree that the Asia and Pacific region has achieved rapid economic growth and agricultural and rural development during the last few decades. Millions have been lifted out of poverty and hunger. However, the problem of chronic hunger is still with us. Much of it exists in parts of South and Southeast Asia, but it is a concern everywhere. FAO's latest

estimate indicate that some 490 million people are undernourished in this region. That is roughly 62 percent of people who are chronically hungry worldwide.

Let me ask you this - how can that be? Frankly speaking, it's a shame that 50 years since the Green Revolution, millions are still deprived of adequate food.

To paint an even bleaker picture, there has been a substantial slowdown in the rate of reduction in hunger in recent years. After decades of improvements the number of undernourished has actually increased in recent years. This is clearly unacceptable. If these trends continue we will fall short of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goal of ending hunger, achieving food security and improving nutrition.

While we grapple with eradicating hunger, we are witnessing an increase of unhealthy diets, resulting in increasing numbers of people who are overweight and obese. The increase in rates of obesity is a ticking time bomb because it will place a great burden

on public health services due to cardiovascular diseases, type-2 diabetes and other related health problems.

Reversing this trend and tackling different forms of malnutrition, obviously requires a wide range of responses involving individuals, the private sector, an overhauling of our food systems, and cooperation among government ministries and within a coherent policy framework. This is not easy to accomplish, I know, but it's not impossible either, with political, administrative and financial commitment.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

Despite all of this, there is still room for optimism. Over the last 12 months, FAO has been working with other UN agencies, academia and others to explore ways to re-work food systems to improve diets and tackle undernutrition across the region. There are genuinely good ideas out there and the private sector is keen to play its role in working toward this much needed shift. We've also convened a regional symposium of the use of safe biotechnologies which, among other things, have proved effective in increasing

production of protein-rich foods and crops that are resistant to diseases. These are important because they relate directly to food security as we aim for production of safer food that meets a country's food needs and meets the international rigors and standards for trade beyond borders.

Also, since our last regional conference, we have been graced by the appointment by our Director-General of a Special Ambassador for Zero Hunger, Her Royal Highness, Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn of Thailand. Her Royal Highness brings a wealth of knowledge to the field of nutrition through her decades of work in Thailand and beyond on issues of food security. Her high profile is also a great help in the form of advocacy to lead the agenda of better food systems and improved diets.

Excellencies, Distinguished delegates

Ladies and Gentlemen

Let me turn to a different issue – another of the complex issues I mentioned. Many of your countries in this region have acknowledged that climate change and increasingly extreme

weather events are a clear and present danger to the achievement of food security, the economy and trade. The people of Fiji know this all too well after taking the brunt of Tropical Cyclone Winston. But the list of countries in this region facing the harsh and dramatic realities of these events is a long one. We will be discussing climate change and the issues affecting the region as a whole and more specifically about small island developing states a bit later today.

In closing, let me say that this year we are celebrating the 40th anniversary of FAO country representations. With continued support and cooperation from member countries, we have come a long way since 1977 when the first in-country FAO Representations were established in this region. There will be a side event just outside this room after the close of your meeting on Wednesday and I hope you will join.

With that, let me close with a very warm thank you to our hosts and to you all. I look forward to our discussions.