

Opening Remarks by Mr. Árni M. Mathiesen, Assistant Director-General of FAO

His Excellency Hon. Mahinda Rajapaksa, President of Sri Lanka

Excellencies

Distinguished Representatives

Honourable Guests

Colleagues

Ladies and Gentlemen

AYUBOWAN!

Let me start by paying a special tribute to the government of Sri Lanka for hosting this Asia Regional Ministerial Meeting on Aquaculture for Food Security and Economic Development. It gives me immense pleasure to be here with you today, representing the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. On this historic occasion it is very encouraging to see here the presence of so many Asian political leaders in fisheries and aquaculture. Most certainly a land mark gathering of Asian political leadership in fisheries and aquaculture! FAO prides itself in the partnership with the Network of Aquaculture Centres in Asia-Pacific – NACA – and the Government of Sri Lanka on this occasion.

Excellencies,

Your presence at this meeting is a clear expression of a political commitment to ensure the achievement of shared and agreed objectives, not only in combating hunger and poverty, but also in enhancing economic and social conditions through responsible aquaculture development in the region. The valued presence of His Excellency the President of Sri Lanka [LATER] on this occasion, further underscores the importance of this event and the necessity for strong political commitment to achieve these shared objectives.

A commitment of this nature is of utmost importance if the world is to feed its ever growing population and improve the nutrition and livelihoods of communities and if aquaculture is to play its full role in achieving this. When we consider that the human population of the world is projected to grow from just under 7 billion today to over 9 billion in 2050, the essential role of aquaculture in ensuring food security and improving nutrition now and in the future becomes even clearer.

A technical presentation on the role and importance of aquaculture in Asia will be given shortly. Therefore I will try not to burden you further with technical details. However, I do feel the need to reiterate that aquaculture now contributes to nearly 50% of the world food fish supply and that Asia, the cradle of aquaculture, has a share of 90%. The importance of aquaculture to Asia as well as the importance of Asia to aquaculture is therefore synonymous.

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Needless to say, we need more fish in the future to feed the growing population of the world. The current levels of exploitation of wild fish resources are at their maximum and in some cases even above it. There is therefore no scope for an increase in capture fishery production to respond to the increasing demands and needs for fish for the ever-growing population. Aquaculture will have to fill this void and the aquaculture sector is poised to do so in the coming decades.

Although aquaculture has made laudable efforts to meet the growing demand for fish and seafood products in a sustainable way, there are substantial challenges ahead of us in meeting the future demand for aquatic food.

As inland environmental capacity for aquaculture development, including the availability of land and water is becoming scarce, more and more sea and ocean resources will have to be utilised for aquaculture purposes. Coastal areas suitable, and available, for aquaculture development are also limited and the expansion of aquaculture operations into the sea might require adjustments in the way the sector is governed.

Failure to govern the sector properly in accordance with the Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries (CCRF) could threaten bio-security efforts, which, in turn could hamper efforts to manage aquatic animal health, conserve aquatic biodiversity and produce fish which is safe for all to eat.

Other serious obstacles for aquaculture expansion are likely to come from climate change and climatic uncertainty. Both will need adaptation and mitigation strategies, which should include collection, dissemination and exchange of information.

There are other obstacles and challenges that we will face during our earnest efforts to produce more fish to meet the future demand for aquatic food in the world. These will be elaborated upon by Dr. Subasinghe during his presentation today.

The daunting task is to seek ways to overcome the challenges. For this we need knowledge and resources. In Asia, there is most certainly no shortfall in knowledge and experience. In fact, Asia has contributed significantly to the world's knowledge of aquaculture. However, we still see the disparity in aquaculture development among the countries in the region. That is why we need to enhance regional cooperation and share knowledge and experience, so that all countries in the region can entertain the benefits of aquaculture.

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You have been invited to come here to make a political commitment for aquaculture development in the region. You will do so, I hope, by adopting the Colombo Declaration on Aquaculture for Food Security, Nutrition and Economic Development in Asia, tomorrow. This will be the first ever political commitment and agreement on aquaculture in the region. As I mentioned earlier, FAO is elated to be a partner in this endeavour and we will continue to collaborate with you in improving aquaculture, which will also help in defeating hunger, which is the primary mandate of FAO.

We are hopeful that the political commitment that this meeting brings about in Asia will result in casting strong and effective regional programmes and strategies for aquaculture development in the region.

Excellencies,

In conveying once again my appreciation and gratitude to the Government of Sri Lanka for hosting this session, let me also thank the Government of Sri Lanka and NACA for joining hands with FAO in this endeavour. I wish to express that I am fully confident that this important meeting will be marked by success and that its outcome will serve to strengthen and further promote aquaculture around the world.

Thank you!