

“Expenditure on conflicts must be diverted towards development”

Colombo Declaration to provide increased access to sanitation adopted at the end of SACOSAN IV

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COLOMBO: The SAARC sanitation summit has decided to establish a national body in each country to “coordinate sanitation and hygiene, involving all stakeholders” to enable access to sanitation to the 45 per cent of south Asians who still defecate in the open. The total number of people uncovered by sanitation initiatives remain unacceptably high in the region, at over 700 million. A majority of these people are in India.

The Colombo Declaration,

signed at the end of the fourth South Asian Conference on Sanitation (SACOSAN IV) to tackle the biggest sanitation challenge in the world, decided to “develop time-bound plans and to allocate and mobilise resources for delivering on all the previous SACOSAN commitments.”

Delegates debated at length on this and came up with three important funding issues: the need for dedicated funding, increasing available funding and, most importantly, spending the available funds within the timeframe set.

“When we began [SACOSAN] it was huge challenge to even get Ministers and Parliamentarians to come. Now they have signed a declaration,” said Barbara Evans, a United Kingdom-based academic and sanitation expert.

The countries in the region sustain significant economic losses equal to at least 5.8 per cent of the total regional GDP due to poor sanitation. “Most shockingly, children and adults are still dying needlessly. Since the last SACOSAN, about 7.5 lakh South Asian children have died of diar-

rhoea,” said Amarananda Abeygunasekara, Secretary, Sri Lankan Ministry of Water Supply and Drainage.

Indian Minister for Rural Development and Panchayati Raj Vilasrao Deshmukh said that sanitation has to be positioned in an integrated framework of public health policy considering the fact that provision of safe drinking water and sanitation facilities can also help contain the incidence of many water-borne diseases. “New areas of research and development of cost-effective technologies

for sustainable sanitation need to be identified. We also need to develop sanitation technologies for diverse eco systems.” Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa, who inaugurated the Ministerial session of the Conference, said that the colossal sums of monies that nations spend on conflicts and wars must be diverted towards development, research and technology to reduce poverty and suffering. Sri Lanka’s humanitarian initiatives have enabled the government not just to end conflicts, but also to divert re-

sources earlier spent on conflicts, now towards welfare and development, the President said.

“Public expenditure on rural-centric initiatives and on farmers, children and similar expenditures on the provision of water, sanitation and clean environment are more productive and beneficial to the welfare of the citizens. Therefore, at a Ministerial Conference such as this, our determination should be to appeal to the world to divert their defence expenditure to development,” he said.