

ASIA WATER DAY HIGHLIGHTS LEADERSHIP ROLE IN SOLVING REGION'S WATER PROBLEMS

STOCKHOLM, SWEDEN (19 August 2008) – Inspired leaders who champion reforms, mobilize resources and involve communities can play a key role in helping Asia meet its many water and sanitation supply challenges, said Xianbin Yao, Acting Director General of Asian Development Bank's Regional and Sustainable Development Department.

Speaking in Stockholm, Sweden at the first ever Asia Water Day to be held during World Water Week, Mr. Yao said water resources in the rapidly growing region of over 4 billion people are coming under extreme pressure as a result of urbanization and industrialization, pollution, and climate-induced natural disasters.

Underpinning these problems has been poor management, with political interference and misunderstandings about how to improve the delivery of water and sanitation services, commonplace. In contrast to the region's booming growth, water infrastructure and the capacity to manage it lags well behind.

"What Asia needs is not just more financing. It needs better management," Mr. Yao said.

He noted that there are far-sighted individual leaders and groups who have achieved extraordinary success in the delivery of water and sanitation services, and they can serve as role models in helping inspire improvements in management. Among them is Mr. Ek Sonn Chan who risked his own life to make unpopular but necessary decisions to turnaround the Phnom Penh Water Supply Authority which was losing 70 percent of the city's water when he took it over in 1993.

Others include Dr Bindeshwar Pathak, the founder of the Sulabh International Social Services Organisation, a non-government group that since 1970 has installed low cost and ecologically sustainable toilets in over 1.2 million houses across India, and Mr. Khun Chamroon Suavdee, a restaurant owner, who chairs the Bang Pakong River Basin Committee in Thailand that has helped overcome community conflicts over water use.

On a broader scale, there are also positive developments, with the number of people in the region without safe drinking water dropping by over 40% between 1990 and 2006, and those without improved sanitation, down by 14%. In South Asia, where not a single city has 24-hour water supply, India, aided by a national reform program, may meet its Millennium Development Goal water targets early.

Asia Water Day discussed wide-ranging issues, among them how the region is adapting to climate change; the challenges of providing water supply and sanitation in urban areas where the population is expected to grow by 70% over the next 25 years; and managing water for agricultural use to ensure food security.

The event, which is being convened and sponsored by ADB, has drawn government, academic, multilateral and civil society experts from around the world.

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