

AFED's Conference Gathers Arabs Environmentally

Manama, 26/10/2008

"It is a great coincidence that the annual conference of the Arab Forum for Environment and Development comes simultaneously with the launching of the Kingdom of Bahrain's National Economic Vision until the year 2030." HH Sheikh Abdallah Bin Hamad Al-Khalifa, President of the General Commission for the Protection of Marine Resources, Environment and Wildlife in Bahrain, added in his statement during the opening session of the Arab Environment 2008 that his country "is honoured to host the conference in which AFED gathered all stakeholders to participate in a serious discussion about how to achieve a sound environmental management, that will lead to a sustainable economic and social development in the Arab world." Sheikh Abdallah was represented by the Minister of Municipalities and Agriculture Dr. Jumaa Al-Kaabi.

AFED's secretary general Najib Saab said: "Among us today are 15 ministers and heads of national agencies or councils, 35 mass media, 22 regional and international organizations, 18 NGOs, and all members of AFED's board of trustees. They came from all over the Arab world and beyond to participate in the launching of the *Arab Environment, Future Challenges* annual report."

The opening session started with the premiere screening of the documentary Arab Environment: Testimony of an Old Man. The documentary tracks changes in the region's environment over a century, as witnessed by Dr. Mohamed Kassas, a world renowned environmental figure and prominent authority on desert environment and former president of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN). After the screening, Dr. Kassas was awarded AFED's Lifetime Environmental Achievement Award 2008, presented for the first time.

AFED's Board of Trustees Vice-President, Dr. Abdelrahman Al-Awadi, pointed out that the *Arab Environment, Future Challenges* report released by AFED is the first serious effort to produce an independent nongovernmental report, prepared by prominent Arab scientists who do not work under government authorities. "Like any attempt," he added, "there were errors in figures and presentations. We shall benefit from the discussions that will take place, in order to correct the figures and prepare a better report next year." Dr. Al-Awadi indicated that the report was a condensed effort of more than 30 scientists who wrote or reviewed the different chapters.

Mahmoud Al-Kooheji, Chairman of ALBA, said that his company is honoured to be the conference partner-sponsor. As one of the largest modern aluminium smelters in the world, he indicated that ALBA has taken advanced steps in environment protection. The company was awarded the UN Millennium Award for international environmental achievements in industry

and the GCC Awards for best corporate commitment to environmental standards and for best environmental education program. This was achieved after ALBA adopted an integrated project plan during the past years to protect the environment throughout the smelter's processes, at a cost of 600 million dollars."

Regional deputy director of the United Nation's Environment Program, Dr. Basel Al-Yousfi, acclaimed the efforts of AFED and the authors of the *Arab Environment, Future Challenges*, stating the report will provide a big help and support to the Environment Outlook for the Arab Region report due in spring 2009.

Al-Herbish: An Arab Magnificent Breakthrough

Director General of the OPEC Fund for International Development, Suleiman Al-Herbish, described AFED's conference as an Arab magnificent breakthrough in a global concern: environment and development. He emphasized the Fund's support of AFED, recalling how he strongly affirmed during its launching in Beirut in 2006 that the notion of sustainable development will not see light in the Arab region until it becomes an integral part of the Arab conscience. An example of this will be integrating environment in elementary school curricula as well as in national civics.

Al-Herbish alerted that "six Arab countries fall below the poverty line, and if we overrule the misleading definition of poverty according to GDP per capita, the majority of the Arab world lags behind when measured by education levels, health services and other basic living standards." Where does the solution come from? From petroleum exporting countries? "These countries provide much assistance in alleviating poverty through development funds such as OFID, which I am honored to direct since 2003.

Recognizing that poverty has become the single disabling factor towards development, Al-Herbish said that developed nations are able to provide many solutions. however when they meet under the G7 flagship, the main topics on their agenda are energy security - mainly the security of demand - and climate change which is a product of the industrial revolution. He added: "Let me remind you that when the financial crash hit New York during the past few weeks, they mobilized 700 billion US dollars within one week to bail out their monetary and banking systems. In short, wherever there is a will, there is a way."

Coming from all over the Arab World

AFED's conference was attended by a host of ministers, heads of regional and international agencies, civil society organizations, regional media and corporate leaders. Those included: Khaled Irani, Dr. Yusuf Abu Safieh , Dr. Tony Karam and Dara Ameen, Ministers of Environment in Jordan, Palestine, Lebanon and Kurdistan Iraq respectively, alongside ten heads of national environment agencies. Also present were former Prime Minister of Jordan Dr. Adnan Badran, Director General of OPEC Fund for International Development Suleiman Al-Herbish,

Executive Secretary of the Regional Organization for the Protection of Marine Environment Dr. Abdulrahman Al-Awadi, former CEO of Global Environment Facility Dr. Mohamed El-Ashry, and former minister of information in Jordan Dr. Nabil Sharif. Some of the delegates had participated in AFED's Board of Trustees meeting which convened in Manama the previous day.

The conference was supported by many leading organizations and companies, including ALBA, OFID, UNEP, Petrofac, Kharafi National, AMSI, Alturki Environmental, General Electric, Ford, Aramex, Promoseven, in addition to a large number of mass media. Many regional and international organizations participated in the conference at the highest levels, including: League of Arab States, Gulf Cooperation Council, United Nations Environment Programme, Centre for Environment and Development for the Arab Region and Europe (CEDARE), Saudi Wildlife Protection Agency, Federal Environment Agency of UAE, Environment Agencies of Abu Dhabi and Sharjah, Organization for the Protection of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden (PERSGA), Regional Organization for the Protection of Marine Environment (ROPME), International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), Arab Centre for the Studies of Arid Zones and Drylands (ACSAD), and International Centre for Agricultural Research in Dry Areas (ICARDA).

The Civil Society was strongly represented by environmental associations from Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, UAE, Qatar, Bahrain and Morocco. The presence of the academic community was noted, especially from Egypt and Saudi Arabia, along with the host country Bahrain, which was also represented by students from the environment programme of the Arabian Gulf University. The younger generation had a slot, with a delegation from AMSI high school students delivering a youth statement.

The launching of AFED Corporate Environmental Responsibility Programme attracted to the event over 50 corporations from all over the region, which participated with delegations including CEOs and heads of health, safety and environment operations. Those came from a variety of sectors, including oil, contracting, environmental consulting, waste management, services, media and the financial sector.

The Arab Environment 2008 conference is held at Diplomat Radisson-SAS in Manama, 26-27 October.