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**Chemicals, Waste, Biodiversity and Climate Change Top Agenda of 19th Forum of Ministers of the Environment of Latin America and Caribbean, as Region Prepares to Host Milestone UN Conferences**

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**Juan José Guerra Abud, Secretary of Environment and Natural Resources of Mexico.**

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*12 March 2014. Los Cabos, Mexico.* Climate change, chemicals and waste management, and biodiversity conservation are top environmental priorities in Latin America and the Caribbean. Strengthening regional cooperation to address these compelling environmental challenges is the main objective of the 19th Meeting of the Forum of Ministers of the Environment of Latin America and the Caribbean, considered the most important environmental meeting in the region, which began today in Los Cabos, Baja California Sur, Mexico.

The regional event, organised by the Ministry of the Environment and Natural Resources of Mexico (SEMARNAT) in collaboration with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), in its capacity as secretariat of the Forum, has gathered together ministers and high-level officials from 31 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. Also in attendance are representatives of international institutions such as the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), the World Bank (WB), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), the Andean Development Corporation (CAF) and the Pan- American Health Organization (PAHO), and civil society.

Renowned international experts on the different issues to be addressed in the ministerial dialogues, including the global sustainable development agenda and cooperation on climate change, biodiversity, chemicals and waste, will also participate in the meeting.

Juan José Guerra Abud, Secretary of Environment and Natural Resources of Mexico, stated: “In Los Cabos we will have the opportunity to share successful experiences and proposals to address the environmental challenges that our region is currently facing. It is indispensable to renew our conception of development in order to guarantee an economic growth that is sustainable. We require practical and innovating solutions as well as solid commitments among our nations.”

“The government of Mexico privileges the relationship with Latin America and the Caribbean as a priority region to reinforce the dialogue, identify common positions and set down cooperation initiatives in diverse areas. Regarding the challenges that the countries of our region currently face, we should be filled with optimism for having solid coordination spaces for the effective and sustainable advance of our societies,” said the Mexican official in his inaugural speech.

“Many countries in the region have taken steps towards the sound management of chemicals and waste, including the development of national assessments, legal frameworks and best practices that can be scaled up and replicated throughout the region. To date, 18 LAC countries have signed the Minamata Convention on Mercury. I would like to seize this opportunity to commend the region’s active involvement in the design and negotiation of the Convention and to welcome the clear commitment to its terms as stated in the Havana Declaration,” said Achim Steiner, United Nations Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director of UNEP, in his address during the inauguration ceremony.

“On climate change, the number of countries adopting climate legislation is on the rise across the region. Mexico’s General Law on Climate Change, passed in April 2012, is a significant achievement. It establishes a comprehensive regulatory framework to address climate change and, at the same time, encourage the transition towards a Green Economy. Other countries in the region have also enacted climate laws,” he added.

**A historic moment for the region and the planet**

Two years have passed since the last Meeting of the Forum of Ministers of the Environment of Latin America and the Caribbean, held in Quito, Ecuador, and the context in which this new regional gathering is taking place lends it special significance. It is the first Meeting of the Forum of Ministers since the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, also known as Rio+20, which was held in Brazil in 2012.

Latin America and the Caribbean will assess the progress made towards sustainable development and join efforts to influence the global debate on the new post-2015 development agenda, and on the Sustainable Development Goals that are expected to take the place of the Millennium Development Goals. Latin America and the Caribbean has an important role to play in the urgent global task of establishing priorities and goals that enable equitable and sustainable development which also respects nature. This Forum gives the opportunity to the Ministers of Environment to articulate to the world, through their voices and their collaborative action, the need to embed the environment in all facets of sustainable development.

In addition, 2014 offers the region a special opportunity to demonstrate its leadership: the Meeting of the Forum of Ministers will serve to support Peru as the host country of the 20th session of the Conference of the Parties (COP 20) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the 10th session of the Conference of the Parties to the Kyoto Protocol. COP 20, taking place in Lima this coming December, could represent a landmark in the fight against climate change if a consensus is successfully forged around a new binding climate agreement, which should be finalized at COP 21 (Paris, 2015).

If we do nothing to prevent it, the consequences of climate change, which is already having a visible and tragic impact in many parts of the world, will be considerably more catastrophic. The latest data gathered by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) points to a possible increase in temperature of up to 4.8 degrees Celsius by the end of the century, and a possible rise in sea level of between 26 and 82 centimetres. For the countries most vulnerable to climate change, the degree of sea level rise could mean the difference between existing and disappearing.

The agenda of the meeting in Los Cabos will devote space to ministerial discussions around the celebration in 2014 of the International Year of Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and the Third International Conference on SIDS, to be held in Samoa this September. UNEP has resolved to dedicate World Environment Day 2014 to the sustainable development of SIDS and the environmental challenges they face.

**A regional platform with the power of global influence**

The intergovernmental consultations regularly held by the highest-level environmental authorities in Latin America and the Caribbean led to the creation of the regional Forum of Ministers of the Environment. More than three decades after the first ministerial meeting, held in Mexico City in 1982, the Forum is returning to Mexico, having become the most important high-level environmental meeting in the region, which has facilitated broad consensus on environmental policies across Latin America and the Caribbean.

One of the objectives of this 19th meeting is to strengthen the Forum of Ministers of Environment as the space for regional high-level policy discussion and cooperation and an effective platform to contribute to and influence the global discussion and decision-making processes with regard to environmental sustainability and sustainable development.

This meeting should facilitate an open dialogue among countries of the region on the main environmental challenges they face, and the exchange of experiences and lessons learnt from each individual country.

The Meeting of the Forum of Ministers of Environment of Latin America and the Caribbean is taking place three months before the first United Nations Environment Assembly of UNEP (UNEA), to be held this June. The meeting in Los Cabos thus offers a valuable opportunity to seek consensus for a regional position on the issues to be discussed, and thereby exercise a more forceful, coherent influence at the global level.

The ministerial segment of the Los Cabos meeting will also address the challenge of the conservation of biodiversity and ecosystem services in the region, on which much of the regional economy depends. Their conservation is both a need and a responsibility for Latin America and the Caribbean, which is home to 34 per cent of the world’s plant species, 30 per cent of mammals, 41 percent of birds, 50 percent of amphibians, 35 percent of reptiles and 31 percent of fish.

“The well-being of humanity and the functioning of the economy and society ultimately depend upon the responsible management of the planet's finite natural resources. Living within the Earth's safe operating space safeguards humanity from crossing ecological or social thresholds that could undermine or even reverse development gains,” underlined Achim Steiner.

All of these issues, which will be discussed by the Environment ministers of Latin America and the Caribbean in the coming days, build on those analysed during the high-level expert segment, which concluded this Tuesday, 12 March. The themes addressed by the experts include, among others, the regional environmental agenda, environmental education, indicators on environmental sustainability in the framework of the Latin American and Caribbean Initiative for Sustainable Development (ILAC, according to its initials in Spanish), sustainable consumption and production, atmospheric pollution, and the Regional Initiative on Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration on access to information, public participation, and access to environmental justice.

It is expected that the work and discussions of the ministers and high-level officials of the region at this meeting in Los Cabos, supported by UNEP as secretariat and by other international experts, will result in a declaration and a package of decisions that effectively facilitate the mainstreaming of environmental considerations in the development policy agendas and in the establishment of a regional cooperation agenda that will contribute to speeding up the pace towards the crucial goal of sustainable and inclusive development.

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