

FAO/UNEP

The Bishkek Mountain Platform

Based on a draft motion submitted by the Government of the Republic of Kyrgyzstan, the United Nations General Assembly in 1998 adopted resolution A/RES/53/24 which declared the year 2002 as the International Year of Mountains (IYM). The resolution encouraged governments and the United Nations system to increase awareness of the importance of sustainable mountain development. This decision was taken in order to account for the fact that mountain areas cover 26 per cent of the earth's land surface and host 12 per cent of its people. They provide essential resources for both mountain and lowland people, including freshwater for at least half of humanity, critical reserves of biodiversity, food, forests and minerals. Mountains are vital to all life on earth and to the well being of people everywhere. What happens on the highest peak affects life in the lowlands, in freshwaters and even in the seas.

During the course of the IYM, numerous events throughout the globe were organised which were targeted at raising consciousness at all levels and sectors of society. These ranged from popular festivities showcasing mountains and the peoples that inhabit these, as well as the environmental and developmental problems they are facing, to academic and intergovernmental meetings where ways to promote their conservation and sustainable development were discussed. The Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) was designated as lead agency in order to coordinate events with governments and other United Nations agencies, especially the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).

The Year of Mountains culminated in a Global Mountain Summit which was held in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan from 29 October to 1 November 2002. This was the first-ever international conference devoted solely to mountain-related issues and was hosted by the Government of Kyrgyzstan. Its ambition was to draw together the ideas and recommendations generated by previous events into proposals for concrete action. Over 600 personalities from sixty countries from governments, international organizations, NGOs and academic institutions thus met in one of the most mountainous countries in the world.

In his opening address to the conference, the Kyrgyz President Askar Akaev called for dramatic changes in attitudes towards mountains, and said he hoped that the Bishkek Summit would become a milestone for the development of mountain countries around the world. He stated, "consumerism toward mountains has caused poverty, depopulation, environmental degradation, loss of ethnic and cultural traditions, interethnic tension, conflicts, migration, and information problems."

Delivering a message from the UN Secretary-General

Kofi Annan, the Rector of the United Nations University Hans van Ginkel stated that the Summit offers an opportunity to improve the lives of people who depend on mountain resources and ecosystems, and to agree on concrete actions that will have an impact well beyond the Year of Mountains. UNEP Deputy Executive Director Shafqat Kakakhel expressed the "strong and overriding need to continue paying priority attention to the interlinkages be-



Kyrgyz President Askar Akaev giving his opening address

Courtesy: WEB

tween the environmental services provided by the mountain ecosystems and the freshwater coming from them." He subsequently introduced the *UNEP Mountain Watch Report*¹ which provides maps, analyses and case studies underlining the following themes:

- the ecological and social values of mountain ecosystems,
- current and potential pressures facing mountain environments and people,
- approaches to sustainable development in mountain areas.

Among the most important findings of the report is that the environmental balance of mountain regions is threatened by the excessive use of natural resources, inappropriate infrastructure development, deforestation, and natural hazards. Contributing to the loss of natural habitats and biodiversity is the growing trend of converting mountain ranges into farming and grazing lands. Global warming has also caused mountain glaciers and snowfields to melt at a more rapid pace, thus resulting in floods and avalanches which are not only detrimental to the environment, but also endanger local communities.

Following a series of further official statements, the Plenary proceeded to take stock of the outcomes of the

major global and regional IYM events and focused on existing processes for regional cooperation in mountain regions. In the afternoon, there was a formal signing ceremony for the *Central Asian Mountain Charter*. Its signatory States Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan thus committed themselves toward increased cooperation in tackling environmental and developmental problems the region has been experiencing since the break-up of the Soviet Union. One of the main sources of tension is the unequal distribution of costs and benefits in using mountain resources, especially water. Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan were also expected to sign the agreement, but did not do so for unspecified reasons.

On the second day, a special intergovernmental meeting on Sustainable Mountain Development was convened in order to discuss national, regional and mountain-specific needs and consider potentials for transboundary intergovernmental cooperation at the mountain range, regional and global level, including a prospective "Network of Mountain Developing States."

Parallel to this a series of working sessions on key mountain issues took place for which a total of ten thematic papers were prepared. One of these sessions was devoted to "International and National Policies and Instruments" and presentations were held by Wolfgang Burhenne (ICEL) on "Prospective International Agreements for Mountain Regions"² and by Douglas McGuire (FAO) on "National Policies and Institutions for Sustainable Mountain Development." Luciano Caveri, Member of the European Parliament, gave an overview of the activities of his parliamentary grouping Friends of Mountains. Augusto Rollandin of the Italian Senate lectured on autonomous systems of governance in local administrations.

The themes of the other working sessions were:

- Sustainable Development of Mountain Regional Economies
- Mountain Culture and Civil Society
- Science, Technology and Education
- The Challenges of Mountain Environments
- Conflict and Peace in Mountain Regions.

A series of roundtables followed in the afternoon. Ministerial officials from Switzerland and Kyrgyzstan, as well as State agencies, such as the German Organisation for Technical Cooperation (GTZ), gave an overview of their experiences with national mountain policies. A special segment was also devoted to instruments of regional and inter-regional cooperation with other mountain States. In addition to the *Central Asian Mountain Charter* mentioned above, several other regional cooperation initiatives are currently under development. Negotiations on a prospective Convention for the Carpathians are nearing completion, while cooperation initiatives for the Caucasus are currently hampered by political tensions in that area. Representatives from Africa, Europe, Latin America, North America, Pacific and Island Mountains were also present.

Non-governmental organisations, such as the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development

(ICIMOD), reported on conservation and sustainable development initiatives in mountain regions. Representatives of UNEP, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Educational and Scientific Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), World Bank and Global Environment Facility (GEF) gave presentations on their work related to mountains and concrete examples of on-site partnership projects with governments, civil society, academic community and the private sector. In addition, several other symposia were held on topics such as the geo-dynamics and geo-ecological problems of high altitude regions, as well as the role of women and wildlife management across borders. The results of all the thematic working groups and roundtable discussions were reported to the evening Plenary session.

The third day of the Summit was devoted to partnership discussions and the *Initiative for Sustainable Development in Mountain Regions* based on the "Type II" partnership initiative that was launched at the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) as the framework to provide follow-up to the IYM. The Aga Khan, Chairman of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) gave a keynote address on "Building partnerships for sustainable mountain development," followed by discussions on the significance of partnerships for mountain regions and roundtables on the theme "working on the partnership." The Plenary subsequently split up into several region- and issue-oriented *ad hoc* working groups aimed at drafting policy elements that were intended to flow into the final conference document, namely a framework for action of which a draft, entitled the *Bishkek Mountain Platform*, was distributed prior to the conference.

Negotiations on the draft *Platform* were concluded past midnight and the text was adopted after a few minor changes by acclamation at the conclusion of the Summit the following noon on Friday, 1 November. The final document represents a synthesis of the recommendations of all previous mountain-related meetings and the thematic papers prepared for the Summit. It offers guidance to Governments and other actors involved with mountain issues on future activities and actions in the 21st century. Its ultimate goal is to improve the livelihoods of mountain people, to protect mountain ecosystems and to use mountain resources more wisely, particularly in developing countries.

The Declaration within the Platform states:

"We, the participants in the Bishkek Global Mountain Summit, the culminating global event of the International Year of Mountains, pledge our long-term commitment and determination [toward] achieving the goals of sustainable development in mountain areas. We are committed to protecting the Earth's mountain ecosystems, reducing poverty and food insecurity in mountain areas, promoting peace and economic equity, and providing support for current and future generations of mountain people – women and men, girls and boys – to create the conditions in which they can shape their own goals and aspirations."

As guiding principles, the undersigning States support "participatory, multi-stakeholder, multi-disciplinary, eco-

regional, decentralized and long-term approaches that respect the principles of subsidiarity, human diversity, human rights, gender equity and the environment." Both indigenous and scientific information and knowledge are considered especially valuable to these aims.

Within its Framework for Action, the document recommends at the international level that the IYM Focus Group of the United Nations should develop a resolution on a framework for action for integrated management of mountain ecosystems. The government of Kyrgyzstan will submit a draft proposal to the UN General Assembly to this effect.* The Platform also encourages the General Assembly to consider establishing a World Mountain Day.

Further pledged is the support for the *International Partnership for Sustainable Development of Mountain Regions*. The document also calls for the creation of the



Pastoral scene in the Kyrgyz mountains

Courtesy: Multimedia Encyclopedia

"Network of Developing Mountain States and Regions" which was discussed during the special intergovernmental session. This was backed by an announcement of the Italian and Swiss governments that they will offer additional funding to this end. The FAO and UNEP have been entrusted with the task of ensuring that follow-up institutional arrangements are made, including support for setting up the proposed "Network." The framework of action sections concludes with a series of proposed measures to be taken at the regional, national and local level.³

During the final hours of the Summit, another important initiative was announced. The government of Norway has offered to help clean up nuclear waste dumps near the town of Maily-Suu, high up in the mountains of Kyrgyzstan. The waste, stored in deteriorating tailings dams, threatens to spill into rivers that flow from Kyrgyzstan into the fertile Fergana valley below (much of it in neighbouring Uzbekistan), and home to almost 20 per cent of Central Asia's entire population. President Akaev commented that the support from Norway and other do-

nors showed how "attitudes were changing towards mountain countries." He added that the new initiative demonstrated "an example of concrete action" as a result of the IYM and the Bishkek Summit.

The International Year of Mountains, however, has brought a more important result by pushing the previously neglected topic of mountains to the forefront of the international agenda and by extending proper recognition to the fact how crucial sustainable development is to mountain regions. During the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm (UNCHE) the issue of mountains was alluded to in indirect fashion at best. *Agenda 21*, which was adopted in 1992 at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio (UNCED), has one Chapter devoted to the Sustainable Development of Mountains (Ch. 13). Two months

prior to Bishkek, the WSSD in Johannesburg in its *Plan of Implementation* devoted one paragraph underlining the importance of putting in place effective measures for sustainable development of mountain ecosystems.⁴

Yet, we also have the Bishkek Summit to thank for driving home the point that in addition to protection of the environment and conservation and wise use of natural resources, the concept of sustainable development must be meticulously applied to mountains, as they are one of the most fragile ecosystems on earth and a significant proportion of the global population depends on these for their survival. The plight of mountains without doubt will continue to be highlighted during next year's International Year of Freshwater since a major share of the world's freshwater resources originate from mountainous regions.

Another important insight of this Summit was that options to promote sustainable mountain development on a global level are limited. The overall consensus is that one should focus more on regional cooperation among States who are connected to the same mountain range since this is more likely to garner tangible results.

As a final remark, it must be noted that President Akaev who acted as Chairman and who was present throughout the whole course of the Summit received high marks for facilitating the deliberations and guiding the negotiations to a successful conclusion. (WEB/MAB)

Notes

* (Note by the Editor: the relevant resolution will be reproduced in this journal as soon as it has been adopted).

¹ The report and key data are available at www.unep-wcmc.org/mountains/mountainwatch.

² The full texts of this presentation as well as those held in the thematic working sessions are available at www.globalmountainsummit.org.

³ For the full text of the Platform, please consult the official Summit web site as listed above.

⁴ Paragraph 42 of the WSSD Plan of Implementation.

