

Inaugural Address
XXX Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting

Shri Kapil Sibal
Hon'ble Minister for
Science & Technology and Earth Sciences

on
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at

New Delhi

Mr. Chairman – XXX ATCM Prof. U.R. Rao, Secretary, Ministry of Earth Sciences Dr. P.S. Goel, Executive Secretary of Antarctic Treaty Secretariat Mr. Jan Huber, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen.

Good morning and a very warm welcome to you all. It is indeed an honour for me to inaugurate the XXX Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting in New Delhi. It is also our privilege to be hosting this meeting for the first time in the Silver Jubilee year of our signing the Antarctic Treaty. Like most, I have always been in awe and admiration of the icy continent, its pristine beauty, tough conditions, unique life form and enchanting landscapes.

I was fortunate to visit the Antarctica and see our scientists work in harsh, difficult conditions, understanding and unraveling the mysteries of nature. Ever since my association with our national Antarctic mission, with its international linkages, I have been pro-actively engaged in the growth and overall progress of the Indian Antarctic Programme.

Under the Antarctic Treaty System, the global community has demonstrated how collectively we can manage to work together as an R&D global enterprise, unraveling data adrift, afloat and exposed in a large land mass for billions of years. Apart from being a pre-cursor to the Space Treaty, the world has learnt many lessons from the Antarctic Treaty : lessons in good governance and environmental stewardship. The Antarctica is considered a natural reserve and heritage of mankind, untouched by human conflict and exploitation. Here the

global community has pledged to devote itself to the cause of scientific research.

The last few years have witnessed a growing international awareness recognizing the sensitivity of the Antarctic environment; the imperative of protecting it from global change processes and endorsing the criticality of its conservation by a scientifically informed management system. The Antarctic Treaty Parties have a special responsibility to cooperate in scientific pursuit and evolve consensual programmes endorsed by a mutuality of interest. We all recognize the importance of the Antarctica as a platform for science. Despite more than 50 years of collaborative scientific research and exploration, this great Continent has still not unraveled its deep hidden secrets. We have not even touched the tip of the iceberg.

Over the years, new challenges pose our polar scientists and policy makers. In this great enterprise, we need to strike a delicate balance between science and the environment. Our scientific research projects must not negatively impact the Antarctic environment.

Antarctic research must have a transnational focus and mostly addresses global issues. The International Polar Year has brought countries together for the launch of a comprehensive science mission. Such a mission is not geared for economic gain. It is, in fact, a long term campaign through which scientists hope to unravel the enigmas of nature and space best understood from a vantage point, like the Antarctica.

I understand that the annual Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meetings provide a platform to negotiate and hammer out a consensus for adopting decisions on the operational activities in the Antarctica and the future course of action on the various scientific, logistic and environmental issues.

In the present scenario of globalization where national barriers are fast disappearing, where time zones have shrunk, I feel that we must embark upon a new global enterprise, chartering new areas of international collaboration in the true spirit of the Antarctic Treaty.

For the last 48 years this Treaty has provided a stable and robust framework for conducting scientific research and other human activities in the Antarctica. This has generated a wealth of valuable scientific information for our mutual benefit. The discovery of the ozone hole was first made by scientists working in the Antarctica, enabling us to embark on a journey to phase out ozone depleting chemicals. India is deeply committed to continue to play an active role in the domain of Antarctic science and logistics with the underpinning motto to preserve the pristine environment of the last frontier on earth.

Those who crafted the Antarctic Treaty might not have thought of the possibility of large scale human activities in the icy continent for recreational purposes. The growth of tourism in the Antarctica needs to be looked at afresh, in the context of exploitation of the resources of this vast continent, as well as the imperative of protecting the Antarctica environment. We share the concern of the global community on growing environmental pressures, which the Antarctica

is now facing. I am sure these issues will be debated during the meeting and a consensus will emerge on the advisability of tourism and other human activities in the Antarctica, and a framework of regulation to contain it.

The second issue, which needs to be addressed, is the importance of the polar region in the context of global climate change and its impact on our environment, going by the recent data and issues thrown up by the Inter-Governmental Panel on climate change. International Polar Year (IPY) 2007-08 will surely be focusing on these issues. Deliberations during this meeting will further steer us in achieving goals and targets necessary for reducing the human impact on the earth systems and natural resources, to halt and thereafter reverse the impact of global climate change.

It was Albert Einstein, who aptly stated : ***"As a scientist I believe that nature is a perfect structure, seen from the standpoint of reason and logical analysis"***. Let us not damage or harm nature any further. I would like to recall the Edinburgh Antarctic Declaration on the International Polar Year, made last year by the XXIX ATCM. While urging countries to join in collaborative scientific pursuits, it also made clear that this Treaty has stood the test of time and has secured the Antarctica as a continent of peace and science. I hope that we will be able to further strengthen the Treaty in our forthcoming deliberations. I wish the delegates of this important meeting, meaningful discussions during the next two weeks. It is my pleasure to declare the XXX ATCM open.