

Building the bridge.

Juan Rafael Elvira Quesada speaks with Satinder Bindra

Mexico is no stranger to hosting the UN's premier outreach event on the environment – World Environment Day (WED). The country last hosted it in 1990 and late last year won a fiercely competitive bid to become only the second country after China to do so twice.

The theme of this year's World Environment Day is 'Your Planet Needs You – Unite to Combat Climate Change'. As part of its responsibilities, the Mexican government will stage festivities over five days in various parts of the country. The celebrations will provide an opportunity for the government to demonstrate how its payments to hundreds of thousands of poor people for protecting forests not only helps in the fight against climate change, but can also alleviate poverty.

This year the international community will also be watching the event closely, because WED takes place just months before what it is hoped will be a meaningful deal for reducing greenhouse gas emissions in Copenhagen, Denmark, in December.

As one of its planned activities for WED, Mexico has pledged to act as a bridge between the North and South to help seal a deal in Copenhagen. To find out more about Mexico's environmental ambitions and WED plans, UNEP's director of communications Satinder Bindra sat down for a freewheeling discussion with Mexico's Secretary of State for the Environment, Juan Rafael Elvira Quesada.

Here are some excerpts:

Mr Secretary, why did Mexico decide to host the World Environment Day festivities and what does this really mean for the country?

"We needed to push environmental topics on to the national agenda, and we think it is a very good opportunity for Mexico to show how we can work together – all the countries – to make a call to everybody to create awareness of the need to work on the environment. I think it is very important for Mexico, for Central America and for all the world."

You talked about reaching the region around Mexico, and also the world: so can you give us a flavour of what has been planned for 5th June and the days surrounding it?

"We are including all of society as a whole – young people, students, children, businessmen and NGO's – in the celebrations. The point is to showcase five different places – Lakes, Rivers, Beaches, Forests and these kinds of ecosystems – all in different parts of Mexico. We have to show how we are

going to protect these places.

For World Environment Day we will invite people to do something related to cultural activities, academic and scientific activities, activities in general for all of society, so that everybody can be part not only of the problem but also of the solution.”

What is the message you want to send to the rest of the world during these celebrations?

“We think that we can tackle a big problem called climate change by reducing poverty and by protecting the forests in Mexico. This solution could be part of the world solution in many of the continents, like Africa, Asia, Latin America. What we want to show is that everybody can work towards climate change, and we can work towards reducing poverty and we can also work towards saving the forests.”

You talked about combating climate change, but what about reducing emissions? Is that going to come up in all the discussions and seminars during these celebrations?

“Yes, we want to show the world our special program for climate change. The president wants to show the world what we are doing to mitigate or cope with Climate Change. Mexico can reach a voluntary goal [to reduce emissions] and can work with the rest of the world because everyone in the world can do something against climate change. You are part of this planet and your planet needs you. To put it another way, we need this planet because we do not have anywhere else to live.”

Mr Secretary, in December this year there will be a very important meeting in Copenhagen to try to reduce growing emissions. Can WED 2009 do anything to convince the countries of the world that an agreement there is critical for the planet?

“Yes of course we want to build the bridge for many countries to go to Copenhagen and reach the agreement. It does not depend on where you are and what is your classification, it depends on how you can invite everyone in the world to work and help to get a good agreement, a world agreement to really protect the environment and the planet.”