Meeting with Environmental Officials and Activists - 8 /Mar/ 2015

In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

I welcome you ladies and gentlemen. Seeing this, thanks God, big crowd, which consists of people who work on environmental issues, will make one both happy and concerned. [It makes one] happy because, praise be to Allah, there is such a big pool of vivid, warm, interested and proficient human force that is aware of this big and important responsibility. However, there is also concern about whether this group, which consists of you who are from various organizations, is coordinated enough around one axis or not. The importance of environment requires that all organizations that are one way or another related to the issue of human environment in this country, work with one another with sincerity. At any rate, I ask Almighty God for his guidance and implore on him to help you [in what you do].

Anyway, the purpose of this meeting is that every year, we plant a few trees here as a symbolic move, during the week which is designated for planting saplings and the days that have been allocated to environment and things like that. Well, it was [due to] a feeling of responsibility that people's attention should be drawn to the issue of planting trees and it has not been ineffective for that matter. Attention has been paid to planting trees, especially in certain parts of the country, including Tehran, during these years. Some shortcomings and problems that existed in the past have been gradually solved to some extent, but this is not the whole story. This year, I thought that due to the importance of issues with which we are grappling now, it would be appropriate to have a meeting and explain about some issues. Afterwards, this issue should not be forgotten and officials should, God willing, take basic and serious steps to solve issues that are related to the environment. Of course, they have given me a report about what I have said in past years – from 1377 [1998-99] up to the present day - for a period of 15 years, about this issue. Many things have been said, [and] recommendations have been offered, but those recommendations cannot, by themselves, remedy and solve [these] big problems. A serious effort and movement is needed in this regard. Of course, many good steps have been taken in these years, which cannot be totally overlooked.

I want to mention some points here. [The] first [point] is on the viewpoint of Islam about the Earth and this planet and this complex which is the cradle of human life and a place for his birth and growth, and then the center of his return [to the Afterworld]. [It is related to] the viewpoint of Islam about the Earth and everything that exists on the Earth. In one place, Quran says, "We have created the Earth – that is this earthly planet – for human beings; [so] it belongs to all of them. It does not belong to some of them; some people are not more entitled to [exploiting] it than others. It does not belong only to one generation. Today, it belongs to you and tomorrow, it will belong to your offspring, to your grandchildren, to your scion, and so forth, and this is true about the entire Earth. The Earth has been created for humans and belongs to all of them. In another verse, [the Quran] says: "He created for you everything that exists on Earth." Everything that exists on Earth and belongs to Earth has been created for you, humans. Therefore, because they are yours, [and since they] are to your benefit and belong to you, you must not destroy them. Everything [on Earth] is valuable. There are things that an ordinary human being may see as valuable and there are things that may seem worthless to them, but they are all of them precious. Once upon a time, there were people in our very country who asked, "What is this odious substance good for?" They were talking about oil. Some people may love the green territories of the northern region of the country and do not like deserts. Now, go and talk to Dr. Kordavani and see what he has to say about the desert. They are all the same, they are all blessings, they are all bounties, [and] they all belong to you. You have no right to destroy them; neither gardens, nor plantations, nor forests, nor pastures and plains, nor the desert. They all belong to human beings and we must take advantage of them.

In another verse [of the Quran, God] says, “[And God sent] you [to Earth] to build it.” The Almighty God, who has created this Earth and crated you, has obligated you to work for the development of the Earth; that is, you should activate the potentialities that exist on Earth. There are many potentialities that have not been known so far and will be known later and their importance and value will be understood later. This is your job; something that you should do. Even now that we think we are taking advantage of all the capacities of Earth, this is not the case. The water, the soil, the air as well as underground reserves and products that exist on the surface of Earth, of which you are currently taking advantage, can be probably used in a way which will be millions of times more efficient, but of which we are not aware now. Humans should continuously strive to find new capacities and to use those capacities to the benefit of human life. There is another verse in Quran about the “avowed enemy,” that is, the most obstinate, the most ominous, and the most stubborn of enemies, whose characteristics have been enumerated. One of their characteristics is that when they find power on Earth they foster corruption and kill people and products. They corrupt the product; that is, both the plant and human products, and destroy them.

Today, if you look at the world politics, you can find people who are doing this with all nations or with many nations; [that is], destruction of products and people. Almighty God considers this as corruption. Then He says, “And Allah does not like corruption.” These were just a few verses [of Quran] that I recited here. There are tens of traditions [hadith] with lofty content in Islam and in our religious texts about the Earth, [and] about our environment. These verses that I recited here are among those verses [of Quran] which refer to products of earth all of which belong to humanity and belong to you. The issue of environment is a very important issue. In short, this issue is important because it is about responsibility of humans vis-à-vis nature; they should feel that responsibility. Just in the same way that we feel responsibility with regard to human life, we must feel responsible with respect to the nature. Islam and other divine religions have wanted to preserve the equilibrium between humans and nature. This is the basis and main goal [of these religions]. Not preserving this equilibrium is the result of [a number of] factors, the most important of which is human complacency, thirst for power, and bullying nature of some of us, humans. When this does not happen – that is, the equilibrium is not preserved – then environmental crises take place; an environmental crisis will harm all the humanity and all generations [of human beings].

Today, this crisis is not special to us – of course, if “crisis” is the right word [but] to say the least it is a “major challenge.” This major challenge is not special to us. Today, this challenge can be seen all across the world and is the result of not feeling responsible – with regard to environment. You saw how in the case of Kyoto Protocol, the Americans stood [against the protocol] as a bullying government. I said this in Friday Prayers [sermon] a few years ago and talked about this. That is, a sort of bullying approach to a treaty, which is not related to one country or two countries and this and that corner of the world. It is related to the entire globe. The issue of greenhouse gas is not an issue, which is related to a single country and which damages a single group of people. No, it is related to the entire humanity. The issue of greenhouse gas is not something that may harm a country or a specific group of people; no, it pertains to all humanity. Nonetheless, the main problem with regard to environmental issues is that the consequences of destruction [of environment] are not observed in short term. [And] when they are observed, it takes a long time to make up for [environmental] damage and subsequent problems and in some cases it is impossible. [For example,] consider the melting of the polar ice, which can lead to elevated sea level and many other environmental problems. This is not something to be remedied by humans. Such problems cannot be made better within 10 years and 20 years and [even] 100 years; they will have lasting effects for humanity. I mean, when there are human beings who do not feel responsible [with regard to environment], have decided to convert public riches of the world into their own personal wealth, [and] take advantage of any opportunity to make themselves richer, this will be the result. Bullying [nature] of human beings, brazen disrespect for red lines, and bullying of human powers, powers with money and force, have created such effects and consequences in the world and across the globe.

Well, they are like that at global level. The same is true on country level. On country level, now that we are talking about problems in our country, the situation is similar. That is, the damage done here is also not a damage to be done away with easily. Assume that soil erosion occurs in the country due to oversight, mismanagement and malfunction. Soil erosion is not something to be made up for easily later. The issue of soil is even more important than the

problem with water. We have problem with water and it is a big problem. However, there are many ways to procure water, but such ways do not exist for the procurement of fertile soil. Therefore, inattention to basic principles for protection of environment sometimes leads to such problems. The damage that is done, is not a damage that could be [compensated]. Well, at least it can be prevented, it can be remedied and there are several ways – most of them are about prevention. In some cases the problem can be remedied and it should be remedied. Now take the problem of air pollution into account. Today, the problem of air pollution is among important environmental problems in our country. Right now, in Tehran and other big cities, it is, well, an important problem. This can be both prevented and remedied. If we were really empathic and pooled our forces for the same purpose – that is, all those who are involved in this issue – then this could be done. A certain country's area is one-fifth that of our country and its population is twice ours, but it has solved the problem of air pollution. So, it is possible [to solve this problem]. Therefore, this is possible to do; and we can solve this problem. The issue of dust – or as they call it, the haze – for example, can be solved. These [problems] can be solved. Of course, it needs patience, perseverance, foresight, follow-up, and so forth. The issue of environment is not an issue for this and that government; it is a long-term issue; it is not an issue for this or that person; is not an issue for this or that [political] faction; it is an issue for the entire country. Therefore, everybody should join hands and solve this problem.

There are three basic elements in environment, which should receive due attention: air, water [and] soil. All efforts should be focused [on these elements]. According to figures that have been given to me, 70 percent of air pollution in Tehran is due to transportation, [and] 30 percent pertains to polluting industries. Now, this is the figures they have given me, it may be slightly lower or higher than this. There are [people] among you specialists whose information may be more accurate. Alright, so the cause is known. When we know the cause, we have moved one step closer to solving the problem; we must take this problem more seriously. These issues are not for publicity; these are not among those affairs which first need publicity, [but] work should be done first. When work is done, all people will feel [its impact] even without publicity.

The issue and problem of haze, which plagued [the province of] Khuzestan yesterday, today [it is] in Kerman, and tomorrow may make life difficult for people in another place, [and therefore, it] must be solved. The problem with the haze phenomenon is not just about people's breathing. They have reported to me that forests in western [parts of] country - acorn forests – are at risk of destruction due to the haze phenomenon. If, God forbid, this happens in reality, its losses would be much more than the loss and damage that we may suffer in terms of breathing in Tehran or another place in hazy air. We must be seriously following this issue, work should be done, [and] the cause should be made clear. All the causes [of this phenomenon] should be made known and serious steps be taken to remedy them.

Another problem is the problem of water and its consumption. Two or three years ago, I think in my new year address, I said that 90 percent of the country's water is used in agriculture. All other forms of consumption, including drinking, urban, industrial and other [forms of consumption], account for 10 percent. If we could find ways to only save 10 percent of that 90 percent water which is used in agriculture, it would mean that an amount equal to the water that is currently used for drinking and urban and rural and industrial and other purposes, the same amount of water will be made available to the country. Is this a small achievement? Isn't such a huge achievement worthy enough to make all officials start working and following up on this issue? [And start saving water] by [promoting] pressurized irrigation, [and] by building correct networks? If we collect water behind the dams [but] do not build correct networks – which is unfortunately the case in many instances – we will be actually wasting that water because it will evaporate and go away. In addition, it causes problems behind the dams. There are many things that should be done; these [things that I said] are among those very important things. The issue of soil [is another problem]. I said that soil erosion will pose a bigger threat than water shortage over the long run. A few years ago, there were discussions about watershed management and aquifer management and similar issues, and steps were taken. Such issues should be followed with seriousness and diligence; [and] the work on these issues should never stop.

A major problem in our country – and I'm telling this to you dear brothers and sisters out of experience – is that [problems] are not followed up. We start out good [but] necessary follow-up is not always there. In some cases it is. Any time the follow-up was good, we reached very good results. In many other cases the work has stopped midway and there is no follow-up. This is one of basic problems. Every one of you is a manager in various sectors [of the country]. The country's managers should pay attention to this issue that follow-up is very important.

Another problem is the problem of forests and pastures. Our forests and our pastures are both breathing lungs of cities and living environments, and protect the land and soil about whose importance I already talked. These forests should be protected. Unfortunately, in various parts of the country, [including] these condense and lush forests of north country, [forests] have been at times plundered and encroached upon. In other cases they have not received due attention. I emphasize that you should not allow encroachment upon these forests. Different sectors of country that shoulder a responsibility in this regard, from [department of] natural resources to [department of] environment, to other executive bodies that are related with these issues, [they should not allow our forest to be manipulated] on different excuses – from building amusement parks to attracting tourists and hoteling and similar excuses, to building religious schools and seminary schools. All of these [issues] have been used as excuses to manipulate our forests, to encroach upon them and violate our forests. Stand against such measures with full force.

Another issue is illegal acquisition of land. Of course illegal acquisition of land is not a new phenomenon; it is age-old. Since I was a teenager and a youth, I frequently heard [this words]: illegal land acquisition. Well, this phenomenon was expected to come to a stop under the Islamic Establishment and the Islamic Republic. [We were supposed] not to allow certain people to [illegally] acquire land around cities and on the suburbs and premium areas, and [by doing so, practically] turn public riches into their own personal wealth. Assume that this huge park, which is located at a certain location in the city, is a public wealth. It is very tormenting [to see] that some people turn this public wealth into their personal wealth by trickery, by tampering with the law, or probably by greasing the palms of a few corrupt persons in a given state organization.

Now, the issue of illegal acquisition of land has evolved into illegal acquisition of mountains! I sometimes go to northern Tehran heights and look down; it makes one feel really sorry. I have raised this issue with municipal officials, government officials, and the likes of them time and time again. Well, they have taken steps, but they should stand firm. Officials should stand against such abuses categorically; they should prove themselves efficient. They should not allow any abusing person to [go on with their] abuses through specific means. When you look from aloft, you understand and see what they are doing. First they obtain a permit and establish some sort of installation at the end of a plot of land. When they own that place, the entire plot of land will naturally become transferable. They do such things. These northern and western parts of Tehran are, in fact, breathing spaces of Tehran. [They illegally] acquire the mountains in north Tehran in one way, and [do the same] with lands in the west of Tehran, in another way. In Mashhad, which is my city, I went there and saw some people were building houses, hotels and high-rise buildings along mountain slopes located to the south of the city, which is the main space through which the city breathes. These are not good; these are wrong; such things should be criminalized. One of the main steps [to be taken] is criminalization [of such measures] under the law. Such measures should be criminalized in law and those people who take them should be prosecuted by judicial officials. It would not suffice to merely go there and build a fortress; though unfortunately even this has not been done in some cases; [in some cases officials] do not fulfill their duties.

Nobody should be allowed to violate drinking water sources of Tehran; water sources and breathing [spaces] of Tehran should not be encroached upon. A certain group [should not be allowed] to encroach upon sources of life in Tehran, which is the capital of the country and the seat of the Islamic government. They should be punished. If, God forbid, there were people who did not fulfill their duties within state bodies, punish them in the harshest possible manner. Such steps are totally necessary and fundamental. Both [department] of natural resources and municipality; both [department] of environment and supervisory bodies; all of them should fight this regrettable situation. Protection of the environment and respecting the environment is, after all, a duty for the government; of course

people play a part as well. People can play good roles; [and] cooperate [with state organizations] provided that state organizations follow up on this issue quite seriously. If they act seriously, people will help them. [Therefore,] the first step [to be taken] is to formulate a national document for environmental issues, [followed by] cooperation among state organizations. As I said before, all organizations should seriously cooperate with one another. [The next step] is to obligate environmental annexes for all projects. If you are going to build a road, it must be clear what would be its impact on the environment. If you are going to build a factory, its environmental effect must be clear. Some commercial issues, some sorts of business transfers and transactions should have environmental annexes.

Criminalizing destruction of environment [must be done]. The Judiciary and other bodies affiliated to it, and before them, laws approved in the parliament, must put due emphasis on this [issue]. Of course, we have laws and they are good laws. However, revision is always necessary. Destruction of environment should be criminalized and be prosecuted as a crime. Amendment and revision of the existing laws [and] strengthening of unforgiving supervision [are necessary steps to be taken]. Supervision should be carried out without any exception and heads of supervisory bodies personally see to this. Perhaps, one of the most important aspects is to build culture. People should know how important it is to protect the environment. We must start this from elementary school. In textbooks, our children should understand the importance of pastures and forests and air and water and soil and sea and the likes of them, and should be sensitive about them. Protecting the environment should become part of the public culture. Of course, the role of the national television should not be overlooked. The national television must certainly play a role, but people can also do their part. I personally saw that in one of the resorts in Mashhad, known has Jaagharq, one of my old friends had, and still has, a small plot of land. There was a water spring [whose output was] tantamount to, for example, half of what comes out of the spout of a kettle, was up there. They collected that water, channeled it, preserved it and filled several pools in that plot of land using that water and the land became fertile. [They did this by taking advantage] of a very small amount of water [coming from that spring] which could have been wasted without anybody ever noticing and seeing it.

One of our friends told me that in Yazd, which is among arid regions of the country, some person invited him to a garden. [The host] had prepared a place with trees and plantations and crops and all. He asked, “Do you want to see the water source of here?” They said, “Yes.” Then he [my friend] said the host took them for a long walk, perhaps a few kilometers – I don’t remember the details. They went there and saw a small amount of water, like what comes out of ewer, was coming out [of the Earth]. That person had worked hard, preserved that water, guided it, brought it [to his land] and took optimal advantage of that water. I mean people can make the best use of these water sources that exist in this country in their living environment. “Planting trees” is among good things to do. Of course, they plant trees, but, as I heard, they are not taken care of properly. Planting trees has become a vogue, but when you plant a tree, you have to take care of it. Either people should take care of them, or the municipal organs must do this. Anyway, somebody must do this.

There are some places around Tehran – now let me say this – toward the east of Tehran, there is a big park. [There is] a very vast area between Babaei Highway and Qouchak Mountains. There is a plot of land, which belongs to the Army. During my morning hikes, some days, I go there and move toward the heights; I walk in there. Whenever I go there, I become anxious! I know tens of avaricious eyes are riveted there. They had also taken some steps, but I stopped them. I warned them sternly and I know they have stopped [their activities] temporarily. However, they are waiting for an oversight, or for the time when I will not be there, and they would finally go and conquer that place. It’s really daunting. It is a very big green land, perhaps a few hundreds of hectares in area, - I don’t know its exact area – which apparently belonged to the Army, but it is not used by the Army anymore and is now a bone of contention between the Army and the Ministry of Intelligence and so forth. In my opinion, it belongs to people and must be converted into a public recreational facility. I have frequently told this to various officials. The municipality should go there and acquire that land and put it at people’s disposal. It is a very vast and good place with pleasant weather in east of Tehran, [and is] full of trees. I once even saw a group of gazelles or mountain goats that could be seen from afar. It is such a [nice] place. [This place] should be made available to people to go there and take advantage of it. In case of any dawdling, it will meet the same fate as some other places, where unfortunately, due to

oversight we suddenly saw high buildings started to rise and some people started to claim [those lands]. Some organizations, unfortunately, out of negligence, not on purpose, have handed out certain [plots of] land to their employees, and they [the employees], in turn, have sold the land to other people. These [are examples of] steps and lack of discipline which have taken place, unfortunately, with regard to lands and with regard to these regions, which are breathing spaces of big cities; and such measures have been also taken in the past.

At any rate, this issue is a very important issue; and this job is a very important job. I have always talked about these issues every year. I now said this so that people would know and judge it and use this as a basis to rate [state] organizations. [I said this so that] people would have a criterion to rate [state] organs and judge which organ has been able to take these measures with regard to environment and be successful and which organ has not been able [to do that]. I hope, God willing, the Almighty will make all of you one of those people who can work on this issues.

Wassalamu'alaikum warahmatullahi wabarakatuh