

## FOREWORD

In recent decades the pressure for land has become greater than ever and forests often provide the opportunity to feed an additional mouth. Some 17 million hectares of the world's tropical forest is currently disappearing every year (FAO estimate).

Forest depletion is therefore two-fold: more land is required for growing agricultural crops to meet the needs of the increasing population; more fuelwood and other forest produce is required to sustain the needs of the people. Larger areas are also required for feeding the expanded herds of livestock. The ecological imbalance is further aggravated by the uncontrolled ways of using fire as a means of clearing land and forests for human activities.

In Thailand this public education programme has had a wide spread effect and it has resulted in a reduction of haphazard burning in the country by 30%. This proves that massive campaigns are possible to execute. In some countries, like those of Tanzania and Indonesia, a positive response from the government has been assured and the public awareness is growing in a positive direction with the aid of decision makers, the media, and forestry personnel.

The training will of course also have to include the production of training material and teaching aids. The national forest fire control chiefs will need national trainers and instructors for the further training of voluntary (village) fire brigades.

A recent disastrous forest fire in China (with more than 3 million hectares of forest destroyed) was mostly a result of lack of rural voluntary fire brigades and suitable tools. Accidental fires do occur naturally, but more than 95 % of all forest fires are related to human activities. Consequently therefore, many fire situations may be completely avoided if appropriate training is provided. Additionally, communication equipment and appropriate tools are required to achieve acceptable levels of preparedness before the annual fire seasons occur.

Finland possesses the knowledge of how to organize forest fire control in the field. Despite Finland's 20 million hectares of coniferous forest annual losses are as low as 100 to 400 hectares/annum (compared with countries with larger forest areas) while the forest fire season lasted in 1992 for example, for 3 1/2 months. Tropical savannah fires probably burn over an area of between 0,5 to 1,0 billion hectares/annum (FAO/ ECE International Forest Fire News).

It would therefore be very timely for Finland to make an international proposal to form a special task force for forest fire control under the Office of the United Nations Disaster Relief Coordinator (UNDRO). The United Nations has furthermore declared the 1990s as the International Decade for Natural Hazard Reduction.

In the European context, there is also a strong stand on the forest fire problem, namely the Freiburg Declaration on Tropical Fires, which was launched by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) and the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) of the UN in 1989.