

IFCS VI HIGHLIGHTS MONDAY, 15 SEPTEMBER 2008

The sixth session of the Intergovernmental Forum on Chemical Safety (IFCS Forum VI) opened in Dakar, Senegal, on Monday. In the morning, delegates convened in an opening session and an IFCS Awards ceremony. They also met in plenary to consider organizational and administrative matters. In the afternoon plenary, delegates focused on the agenda item on the future of the IFCS.

OPENING CEREMONY

IFCS President Zoltan Szabó, Hungary, highlighted the importance of Forum VI and stressed the relevance of its agenda for African countries.

Djibo Leyti Ka, Minister of State in charge of the Environment, the Protection of Nature, Retention Basins and Artificial Lakes, Senegal, underlined the Forum's importance for human health and the environment. He stressed the need to consider the impacts of nanotechnology and nanomaterials; called for an efficient strategy on substitution; highlighted lead and cadmium as major concerns; and underscored the importance of discussing the future of the IFCS. He stated that high priority must be given to implementing the Forum's recommendations.

IFCS AWARDS

IFCS President Szabó presented IFCS Awards of Merit to Barbara Dinham, and jointly to Georg Karlaganis and Franz Perrez.

Barbara Dinham, Pesticide Action Network (retired)/Bhopal Medical Appeal, United Kingdom, noted the upcoming 25th anniversary of the Bhopal disaster and suggested that the IFCS contribute to its commemoration. She also reminded delegates that many pesticide users in developing countries lack the necessary equipment and access to information to protect themselves. Dinham called for enhanced collaboration among key stakeholders to achieve more rapid substitution or phasing out of toxic chemicals.

Georg Karlaganis, Switzerland, stressed that the non-bureaucratic working structures of the IFCS and its multi-stakeholder and multi-disciplinary approach make it the ideal forum to address emerging issues and contribute to the sound management of chemicals at the global level. Franz Perrez, Switzerland, emphasized the role of the IFCS as a link between fostering understanding and formulating solutions. He emphasized that it was the Forum's flexible and inclusive working structures that enabled the IFCS to fulfill its role.

IFCS President Szabó then announced the IFCS Special Recognition Awards for Ravi Agarwal, Lilian Corra and Abiola Olanipekun.

Ravi Agarwal, Srishti/Toxics Link, India, praised the IFCS for providing civil society with the opportunity to participate in international chemicals management on an equal footing with governments. Noting that the production of chemicals was shifting to emerging economies and developing countries, he stressed that it was the poorest that were least able to protect themselves against negative impacts from this production.

Lilian Corra, International Society of Doctors for the Environment (ISDE), Argentina, stressed the importance of working for the sound management of chemicals and reducing their harmful effects on human health and the environment.

Noting that she considered her award as an award for Africa, Abiola Olanipekun, Nigeria, emphasized the importance of: access to resources; capacity building; implementation of policies and regulations; information sharing; and technology transfer for sound chemicals management in Africa.

IFCS PLENARY

ORGANIZATIONAL MATTERS: Delegates designated Imogen Ingram, Cook Islands, as the rapporteur and adopted the agenda (IFCS/Forum-VI/01w.Rev1) and time schedule (IFCS/Forum-VI/03w).

PRESIDENT'S REPORT: IFCS President Szabó reported on preparations for Forum VI and IFCS regional Vice-Presidents reported on regional groups' activities.

ADMINISTRATIVE ITEMS: IFCS Executive Secretary Judy Stober introduced the IFCS financial statement (IFCS/FORUM-VI/04w). Regarding the IFCS trust fund overview, she noted the negative predicted balance and said the maximum amount indicated was seldom spent. Regarding the expenditures report, she said the approved 2008 budget allowed for flexibility to take into account Forum VI preparations, exchange rate fluctuations, and a decline in the value of the US dollar. She explained that the statement does not contain the estimated future budget for the Forum and proposed the issue be taken up in conjunction with the agenda item on the future of the IFCS. She noted support for NGO participation in the meeting, thanking Thailand in particular.

FUTURE OF THE IFCS: In the afternoon plenary, delegates considered the agenda item on the future of the IFCS.

IFCS President Szabó emphasized the IFCS's role in fostering coordination and cooperation among stakeholders, its inclusive character and its contribution to information sharing. He explained the parameters that the Working Group on the Future of the IFCS had defined, including the need to: avoid

duplicating existing processes; provide added value; contribute to the implementation of The Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management (SAICM) and the achievement of the 2020 goals of safe production and use of chemicals worldwide; and receive substantial international recognition, including through financial resources and in-kind contributions.

IFCS Vice-President Katima introduced the three options formulated by the Working Group: the first option is to retain the IFCS as a distinct/independent institutional arrangement that avoids duplication, enhances synergies and saves costs; the second option is to integrate the IFCS into the International Conference on Chemicals Management (ICCM) by designating part of each ICCM meeting as a Forum session; and the third option is to integrate the IFCS into ICCM by making it a subsidiary body.

GERMANY commended the IFCS's cost-effective, open and transparent procedures. He identified the need to adapt to new developments and, with AUSTRIA and SWITZERLAND, expressed support for the third option of integrating the IFCS into the ICCM as a subsidiary body. AUSTRIA highlighted the need to avoid duplication of work and the CZECH REPUBLIC said limited financial and human resources must be taken into account when considering the future of the IFCS.

While commending the IFCS's past achievements, SWITZERLAND called attention to the IFCS's "tremendous financial difficulties," stating that the situation is not sustainable. He noted that SAICM has many benefits but is "also struggling" in bridging science, policy and reality, and stated that the third option would benefit both SAICM and the IFCS. FRANCE called for maintaining the Forum's uniqueness in allowing all stakeholders to participate on an equal footing, and supported the third option as a basis for further discussion.

Supported by ZAMBIA, Nigeria, for the AFRICAN REGION, underscored the IFCS's complementary role and advocated the first option of retaining the IFCS as a distinct institutional arrangement. THAILAND commended the IFCS for its openness and inclusiveness; stressed its importance for developing countries and emerging economies; and underscored the need to maintain the IFCS's distinct and independent identity. HAITI emphasized that the IFCS has done "a wonderful job" in terms of chemicals management and supported preserving its distinct identity.

ARGENTINA regretted that new and additional resources for chemicals management had not been forthcoming. He stated that SAICM is not yet fully developed and lacks funds, argued that doing away with IFCS would be "suicidal," and supported the first option to ensure the Forum's independence.

Slovenia, on behalf of CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE (CEE), said the first option was unrealistic. Suriname, for the LATIN AMERICAN AND CARIBBEAN GROUP (GRULAC), lamented that the promise of new and additional financial resources has not been fulfilled, and expressed openness to discussing all three options. Supporting GRULAC's position, CHILE said the IFCS should contribute to reducing duplication and achieving efficiency. He supported maintaining the IFCS's functions.

The UK explained that her country's priorities had changed and her country had become a strong supporter of SAICM, but said the Forum's integrity, such as the lead country approach on issues, which increases collaboration and ownership of documents, should not be lost. She proposed identifying the future function and role of the IFCS before discussing the institutional structure.

Iran, for the ASIA PACIFIC GROUP, noted his group required more time to formulate a common position.

CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL LAW (CIEL) urged delegates to agree on a decision on one option regarding the future of the IFCS, as well as on how it can be implemented. INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL OF CHEMICAL ASSOCIATIONS (ICCA) said that SAICM's launch made continuing the IFCS as an independent institution unnecessary. He expressed support for the second option of integrating the IFCS into the ICCM by designating part of each ICCM meeting as a session of the Forum. The INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION (ITUC) identified some of the problems in international chemicals management, including: ICCM is not fully structured; IFCS is not economically sustainable; and some partners are not present at this meeting. He stressed that the current situation is not sustainable. PESTICIDE ACTION NETWORK ASIA AND THE PACIFIC (PAN AP) expressed support for the position of the African Region and highlighted the basic principle of protecting health and the environment.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT POLICY INSTITUTE suggested separating the question of the IFCS's relevance from that of its financial situation. Stressing that the Forum's transparency, openness, flexibility and inclusiveness were key to its success, he supported the first option. ISDE supported the first option, suggesting that the only strong argument against it was the financial situation. Pointing to the IFCS's financial problems, ITUC urged delegates to adapt to the changing reality rather than fight it. The WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION (WHO) noted that incidents related to the inadequate management of chemicals represented a major challenge to public health and said that the health sector should not address this problem alone.

Nigeria, for the AFRICAN REGION, clarified that she is not opposing the SAICM process but sees that an independent IFCS can still make an effective contribution. She stressed that the third option would also require additional funding for the new ICCM subsidiary body. SWITZERLAND stated that discussions should not be reduced to a financial debate and called attention to the IFCS's institutional and political challenges.

Responding to statements about its status, SAICM highlighted its positive financial situation and progress with implementation.

Delegates then agreed to establish a working group on the draft decision on the future of IFCS, to be chaired by IFCS President Szabó and IFCS Vice-President Katima.

IN THE CORRIDORS

Even with a busy week of substantive discussions ahead, the question that appeared to be on everyone's mind on the first day of the conference was what the future holds for the IFCS. The lengthy plenary debate and diverging views seemed to be a sign of things to come in the days ahead, with some calling for maintaining the IFCS as an independent body and others adamant it be integrated into ICCM. Some delegates alluded to an apparent rift between some developing countries, who fear they will lose their advocates if IFCS is "sunset" believing the role of NGOs would be diminished, and some developed countries, who argue that subsuming IFCS under ICCM as a subsidiary body is the only way to ensure continued support for the Forum. Delegates left for the host country's reception hoping to relax for one evening as they had no doubt the debate on the future of the IFCS will be difficult and extremely political once the working group gets underway, with evening sessions already planned.