

GCSS-9/GMEF HIGHLIGHTS: TUESDAY, 7 FEBRUARY 2006

On the opening day of the ninth special session of the UNEP Governing Council/Global Ministerial Environment Forum (GMEF), delegates met in plenary in the morning to hear opening statements and address organizational matters. In the afternoon, delegates held ministerial consultations on energy and environment. They also convened a Committee of the Whole (COW) to discuss issues relating to international environmental governance.

PLENARY

OPENING OF THE SESSION: Rachmat Witoelar, Indonesian State Minister for the Environment and President of the GCSS/GMEF, said the 2005 World Summit had reaffirmed that sustainable development is a key element of the overarching framework of UN activities, and had recognized key environment issues such as chemicals management and energy as international priority issues. He stressed that States must work together to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) targets, and emphasized the importance of implementing the Bali Strategic Plan for Technology Support and Capacity-building, and promoting South-South cooperation to increase capacity building and technology support.

Hamad A. Al Midfaa, United Arab Emirates Minister of Health and Chair of the Federal Environment Agency, noted the importance of the energy, chemical management and tourism policy issues to be discussed in the ministerial consultations, and highlighted his country's achievements in these areas.

Anna K. Tibajuka, UN-HABITAT Executive Director, stressed the links between environmental degradation and urban poverty and highlighted cooperative efforts between UN-HABITAT and UNEP.

Stressing the need for international support for capacity building and technological assistance, Yahya A.J.J. Jammeh, President of the Gambia, highlighted the importance of implementing the Bali Strategic Plan and called for a "Dubai Global Compact on the Bali Strategic Plan" and the creation of a special trust fund for implementation in selected pilot countries.

Moritz Leuenberger, President of Switzerland, stressed the need for countries to follow the polluter pays principle, strengthen international environmental governance institutions, and set clear environmental goals.

UNEP Executive Director Klaus Töpfer described the GMEF's work, including the Malmö Declaration and the Bali Strategic Plan for Technology Support and Capacity-building. He expressed his appreciation to all those who have supported UNEP.

Organization of the session: The plenary adopted the draft agenda without amendment. Delegates then elected Lena Sommestad, Sweden's Minister for Environment as Vice-President of the Governing Council (GC). Delegates also set up a COW to consider: the state of the environment; policy issues; follow-up to the WSSD; international environmental governance; outcomes of intergovernmental meetings; and implementation of UNEP's Programme of Work. Delegates elected Beat Nobs (Switzerland) as Chair of the COW, noting that this election of a representative of a country that is not a member of the GC would not constitute a precedent.

Country Statements: OMAN highlighted his government's commitment to environmental protection in the context of tourism, and to the safe management of chemicals and wastes. He called for robust decisions on both issues, as well as on energy. Monique Barbut, Secretariat, stressed UNEP's involvement in the SAICM process and its future role in implementation, including support to SAICM's secretariat and the administration of the trust fund for the Quick Start Programme.

MINISTERIAL CONSULTATIONS

Ministerial consultations, moderated by Christine Churcher, Ghana's Minister of Environment and Science, and Cristina Narbona Ruiz, Spanish Minister of Environment, were held in the afternoon, focusing on issues concerning energy and the environment. Klaus Töpfer reminded delegates that energy was high on the agenda of the next session of the Commission on Sustainable Development.

Keynote speeches: Prince Majlis El Hassan Bin Talal of Jordan said the Club of Rome's model of "limits to growth" was still valid, and stressed the need to focus on energy security, climate change, and access to energy by developing countries.

Margaret Beckett, UK Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, stressed the need for a new paradigm to achieve economic prosperity, and to address the issue of sustainable energy production and consumption.

Discussion: Moderator Narbona highlighted the unsustainability of the current world energy model. Many speakers emphasized the importance of renewable energy, energy efficiency, technology transfer and innovation.

The EUROPEAN COMMISSION called for a new global sustainable energy policy that addresses climate change and provides access to energy. The EU said progress still needs to be made on access to sustainable, reliable and affordable energy to help meet the MDGs. WHO said human health would greatly benefit from sustainable and clean energy. JAPAN said governments should encourage business-to-business energy technology transfer. MALAYSIA highlighted its use of palm oil to produce biodiesel fuels. Arguing that projected carbon dioxide emissions would mean "suicide for humankind," FRANCE called for the reorientation of energy use and investment choices.

PAKISTAN highlighted the importance of market mechanisms. PORTUGAL said technology improvement is the key to promoting renewable energy development. NIGERIA drew attention to clean coal technology and implementation of the Bali Strategic Plan. BANGLADESH said energy use and climate change are closely linked, and his country was promoting the use of solar energy. Bahrain, for the ARAB GROUP, raised issues including capacity building, financial resources, and information sharing.

Urging developed countries to fulfill their commitments, CUBA said 20 percent of the world's population is responsible for 80 percent of the planet's destruction, and stressed that States must address the root causes of environmental problems, such as consumption and production patterns. COSTA RICA highlighted the importance of information exchange and the use of payments for ecosystem services. The CZECH REPUBLIC emphasized the importance of long-term strategies. PALESTINE stressed the need to focus on the links between energy, agriculture and development. The UK emphasized the value of using the Kyoto Protocol's Clean Development Mechanism for capacity building and technology transfer.

COLOMBIA shared its experience with the use of tax schemes to promote technological improvements for small-scale projects. VENEZUELA called for decisive action to change the current production and consumption model. GUINEA-BISSAU urged international organizations and the private sector to stimulate development of alternative sources of energy. REPUBLIC OF KOREA emphasized the role of governments in promoting renewable energy development. The US said renewable energy was not a "panacea" and emphasized the key role of technology to respond to energy demand, which could be promoted through official development assistance.

HAITI highlighted the need for improved urban development, implementation of the Bali Strategic Plan, a change in unsustainable consumption patterns, and research on efficient energy sources. He also called on enterprises in industrialized countries to provide technologies in using urban waste to produce electricity. ISRAEL supported the use of solar energy in new buildings. SLOVENIA focused on, among other things, the role of women in small-scale projects.

SWAZILAND urged more funding for research and access to clean technology for every community. KENYA said there is a high potential for developing solar energy in equatorial regions. ARGENTINA said lack of investment is a major obstacle. TANZANIA said little has changed in energy use in his country over the last 20 years. IRAN, ECUADOR and MADAGASCAR outlined their energy policies and practices. SWEDEN called for greater access to energy by women and to clean energy sources. INDONESIA called on international financial institutions to help improve energy affordability. THAILAND commented on energy security, efficient energy management, research in renewable energy, and partnerships.

President Witoela suggested, and delegates agreed, that a draft decision on international chemicals management would be forwarded to the COW.

COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE

The COW opened in the afternoon, with Beat Nobs (Switzerland) as Chair. George Krhoda (Kenya) was elected rapporteur.

UNEP Deputy Director Shafqat Kakakhel introduced the agenda item on international environmental governance, focusing on three aspects: Environment Watch, the Environmental Management Group (EMG), and the Bali Strategic Plan for Technology Support and Capacity-building. Delegates also discussed universal membership for UNEP's Governing Council.

BALI STRATEGIC PLAN FOR TECHNOLOGY SUPPORT AND CAPACITY-BUILDING: This item was introduced by the Secretariat, which focused on the Plan's implementation to date and on further work planned for 2006-2007 (UNEP/GCSS.IX/3/Add.1). The GAMBIA reported on the implementation of the Bali Strategic Plan in six African countries. RWANDA described work being done on the UNDP-

UNEP Poverty and Environment Initiative, which has integrated the relevant programmes run by the two bodies, and made suggestions on improving project performance.

ENVIRONMENT WATCH: On the updated proposal for a UNEP Environment Watch system (UNEP/GCSS.IX/3/Add.2), many delegates highlighted the importance of strengthening the scientific base of environmental work. Several delegations, including the EU, encouraged coordination between Environment Watch and other instruments, such as the Global Earth Observation System of Systems (GEOSS). A number of speakers also agreed that further elaboration and clarification on the Environment Watch proposal was needed, although most felt that the latest report was a distinct improvement. The need to avoid duplication, use existing networks wherever possible, and benefit from synergies of Earth observation systems, was also highlighted.

Uganda, for the G-77/CHINA, noted the need to nominate national and regional focal points and make reporting procedures more user-friendly and less complicated. NORWAY suggested that a decision on Environment Watch could be taken at the next Governing Council. The PHILIPPINES felt that much work remained to be done. The US, supported by AUSTRALIA, said Environment Watch was "very complicated" and required further consultations.

JAPAN was encouraged by the fact that no additional financial implications in terms of institution building had been indicated. COLOMBIA urged that work should focus on reducing the impacts of natural disasters.

SWITZERLAND suggested that UNEP compile a list of recent multilateral environmental goals to help focus discussions and catalyze further action. The US opposed this idea.

ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT GROUP: Halifa Drammeh, EMG Director, introduced this item, outlining recent developments in system-wide coherence and cooperation. On behalf of EMG members, Walter Erdelen, Assistant Director General of UNESCO, reported on the High-Level Forum of the EMG held in Geneva on 24 January 2006.

The EU commended UNEP's efforts to intensify cooperation with other agencies, particularly UNDP. She stressed that the EMG must be a result-oriented mechanism, enjoying "buy-in" from all parts of the UN system.

The G-77/CHINA welcomed EMG activities, and expressed hope for increased collaboration within the UN system. She stressed that sustainable procurement is not an immediate priority for the EMG and that the EMG should be instrumental in promoting collaboration on implementing the Bali Strategic Plan. The US defended sustainable procurement as a valuable theme.

SWITZERLAND said the EMG had not lived up to expectations and supported its revitalization. EGYPT welcomed the EMG's idea to hold a broad-based partnership forum.

OTHER ISSUES: Regarding universal membership of the Governing Council, PAKISTAN expressed concern at plans to forward to the UN Secretary-General recommendations emerging from a ministerial dinner. Many speakers agreed, including INDIA, RUSSIAN FEDERATION, BRAZIL, the PHILIPPINES, US, and EGYPT. Chair Nobs said he would inform the Governing Council President of these comments.

IN THE CORRIDORS

Plans to use discussions at a ministerial dinner as the basis for recommendations on universal membership of UNEP's Governing Council had the corridors buzzing on Tuesday evening. The idea that the ministerial dinner, to be held Wednesday night, could play a major part in the governance debate caused much concern among many delegates. "In principle, decisions on such an important issue should be taken up in formal negotiations" said one diplomat.

Participants also felt that engaging ministers in this way would be unfair and would defeat the idea of an informal and free exchange on what one NGO representative described as "a sensitive problem with a lot of complex history behind it."