

GC-25/GMEF HIGHLIGHTS: MONDAY, 16 FEBRUARY 2009

Delegates at the 25th session of the UNEP Governing Council/Global Ministerial Environment Forum (GC-25/GMEF) convened in the morning for the opening ceremony, followed by consideration of organizational matters, and a policy statement by UNEP Executive Director Achim Steiner. In the afternoon, delegates convened for ministerial consultations on the nature and scale of current environment and development challenges and opportunities under the themes “Global crises: national chaos?” and “International environmental governance: help or hindrance?” The Committee of the Whole (COW) also met in the afternoon and addressed organizational matters, and began consideration of the budget and programme of work for the biennium 2010-2011.

OPENING CEREMONY: GC-24/GMEF President Roberto Dobles, Minister of Environment, Costa Rica, welcomed delegates and noted several achievements including the completion of the 2010-2013 UNEP Medium-term Strategy (MTS), which he said provided clear vision and direction for UNEP.

Angela Cropper, Deputy Executive Secretary, UNEP, read a message on behalf of UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon stressing the importance of the GC/GMEF process, highlighting GC leadership on mercury and the need for a green economy.

Inga Klevsby, Deputy Executive Director, UN-Habitat, explained that cities are a driving force for global trade, but that they also generate the bulk of waste. Pointing to conventional wisdom predicting the economic downturn will lead to fewer jobs, she challenged delegates to see the situation as an opportunity.

UNEP Executive Director Steiner said UNEP challenges the myth that, when the economy is in crisis, environment and social issues take a back seat. He stressed that environment is part of the solution, and highlighted the green economy and the need for a green new deal. The environment ministers assembled at the GC/GMEF, he noted, have a unique opportunity to inspire and guide the global economic agenda.

Mwai Kibaki, President of the Republic of Kenya, called for greater vigor in addressing current environmental problems, for a global partnership for sustainable development, and moving to a green and low-carbon economy. He referred to the importance of strengthening global environmental governance, particularly in the field of compliance with existing multilateral agreements.

ORGANIZATIONAL MATTERS: The plenary elected Oliver Dulić, Minister of Environment, Serbia, as GC-25/GMEF President. Other Bureau members elected were: Mohamed Cherif

Rahmani (Algeria), Juan Carlos Cué Vega (Mexico), and John Matuszak (US), as Vice-Presidents; and Budi Bowoleskono (Indonesia) as Rapporteur.

GC-25/GMEF President Oliver Dulić said events in 2008 demonstrated that environmental investment is the way to sustainable economic growth, and the GMEF should shape solutions to move the world forward. He declared his intention to use the President’s Summary toward that end, and urged the drafting group to begin work Monday afternoon. The plenary then adopted the draft agenda without amendment (UNEP/GC/25/1 and Add. 1/Rev.1) and agreed on the GC-25/GMEF’s organization of work.

POLICY STATEMENT BY THE EXECUTIVE

DIRECTOR: In his Policy Statement, Executive Director Steiner outlined a range of enabling reforms undertaken by UNEP as part of its MTS 2010-2013, noting the focus should not be on mobilizing finances to address global crises, but rather on the manner in which such funds are invested which will have a direct bearing on the resolution and mitigation of other environment and development challenges. He cited UNEP’s programmatic achievements over the past two years including *inter alia*: the launch of the Global Green New Deal and the Green Economy Initiative; enhancing delivery on the Bali Strategic Plan for Technology Support and Capacity-building; mainstreaming results-based management; improving collaboration with more than 15 UN agencies under the One UN initiative. Steiner announced the appointment of Professor Joseph Alcamo as UNEP’s first Chief Scientist and informed delegates that in 2008 UNEP became a carbon neutral organization.

During the ensuing interventions, Nigeria, on behalf of G77/CHINA, stressed that a green economy must be pro-development and pro-poor, and urged developed countries to honor commitments and resist protectionist measures. The Czech Republic, for the EUROPEAN UNION, praised UNEP for responding quickly to the global financial crisis with the Green Economy Initiative. He welcomed the opportunity to discuss IEG, and said the EU wanted an institutional architecture with the ability to address wide threats in a globalizing world. The US hoped for a new spirit of partnership and cooperation and offered to play a leading role in addressing the climate change challenge. In reference to mercury, he said there was a solid basis for developing a legally-binding process. PALESTINE drew attention to the issues faced by his country resulting from occupation and human rights violations, linking these issues with continued environmental degradation.

MINISTERIAL CONSULTATIONS

GC-25/GMEF President Oliver Dulić explained that three keynote presentations would focus on current environmental and development challenges and opportunities, forthcoming international events, and the UN Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) report.

CSD-17 Chair Gerda Verburg, Minister of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality, the Netherlands, discussed the green revolution for sustainable agriculture in the context of environmental constraints. She proposed: investing more in sustainable agriculture; creating an enabling environment by fostering entrepreneurship, addressing land tenure, health and education; providing a sustainable production chain; improving market access, especially for developing countries; and providing food aid and a social safety net by empowering farmers with infrastructure, finance and risk protection against unreliable weather.

Freddy Numbery, Minister for Marine and Fisheries, Indonesia, highlighted the upcoming World Ocean Conference, aimed at developing an integrated and comprehensive picture of threats to oceans and addressing the impact of climate change.

Tadanori Inomata, JIU, presented the Joint Management Review of environmental governance within the United Nations System (UNEP/GC.25/INF/33), highlighting the high cost of institutional fragmentation. He enumerated the JIU's key recommendations as, *inter alia*, the need for: a clear understanding of the division of labor between UNEP and the MEAs; a strategic system-wide policy orientation for environmental protection and sustainable development led by the UN GA; integration of programme support funds for MEAs; and enhancing the coordination of capacity building activities. Supporting the JIU report, TANZANIA noted difficulties for developing countries to participate effectively in international programmes with more than 500 MEAs in existence. UGANDA called on UNEP to scale up successful experiences in the synergistic application of MEAs.

ALGERIA called for the implementation of a triennial plan for Africa and supported by KENYA, for pilot green economy projects. BRAZIL highlighted the success of its national ethanol programme. However, as BANGLADESH cautioned, a focus on biodiesel could divert attention from the urgent need to scale up food production. A representative of the WORKERS AND TRADE UNIONS major group said the new green deal should correct market imperfections and focus on jobs with social benefits.

COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE

INTRODUCTION OF DRAFT DECISIONS: COW Chair John Matuzsak, US, proposed that, Jukka Ousukainen (Finland) assist him in chairing the COW, and delegates approved this. Juan Carlos Cue Vega, (Mexico), was elected Rapporteur, and Daniel Chuburu (Argentina), Chair of the Drafting Group. The COW approved its work programme (UNEP/GC.25/1/Add.1) and established a Working Group on the work programme and budget for the biennium 2010-2011, chaired by Agnes Kalibbala (Uganda) and a Chemicals Working Group, co-chaired by John Roberts (UK) and Festus Bagoora (Uganda).

Angela Cropper, UNEP Deputy Executive Director, highlighted key areas where progress could be accelerated: the science-policy platform for biodiversity and ecosystem services; chemicals, especially mercury; UNEP's programme of work and budget for 2010-2011, and its supplementary budget for 2008-2009. She stressed that science is at the core of UNEP's current work, and emphasized the importance of its MTS for 2010-2013.

UGANDA, Chair of the Committee of Permanent Representatives (CPR), introduced the draft decisions negotiated by that body (UNEP/GC.25/L.1). NIGERIA introduced the draft decisions on waste management and South-South cooperation.

SOUTH AFRICA introduced the draft decision on support to Africa. UNEP Deputy Executive Director Cropper introduced draft decisions regarding the state of the environment and chemicals management. The US announced support for launching negotiations for a legally-binding instrument on mercury in 2009, to be completed before GC-28 /GMEF in 2012. He said the instrument should only focus on mercury and address all significant sources, especially sectors with the greatest global impact including coal combustion.

POLICY ISSUES: On the issue of mercury, Nigeria, on behalf of the AFRICAN GROUP, supported immediate action. Noting the need to avoid the proliferation of new instruments, the EU, supported by URUGUAY, favored the development of a legally-binding instrument on mercury, with a mechanism to add new substances recognized as substances of global concern. JAPAN said there was currently no rationale for adding other substances, and, with CANADA, stressed that an intergovernmental negotiating committee (INC) should begin work as early as possible. AUSTRALIA supported a legally-binding instrument, but stressed that the focus be on mercury to mitigate the risk of losing momentum. BRAZIL called for a legally-binding instrument and emphasized the importance of a financial mechanism.

Serbia, on behalf of the EASTERN EUROPEAN GROUP, supported legally-binding measures on mercury. SWITZERLAND stressed the need for a legally-binding instrument with strong and flexible measures.

THE REPUBLIC OF KOREA supported a convention coupled with voluntary actions. The RUSSIAN FEDERATION, MAURITIUS, SENEGAL and JAMAICA supported Nigeria's proposed amendments and stressed the need for financial resources and technology for SIDS. INDIA said a legally-binding instrument was unnecessary, particularly on unintentional releases, but said it was "quite open" to discuss the issue. CHINA underscored the need for a gradual process and encouraged full use of the partnership mechanism. The Basel Convention Secretariat drew attention to its draft technical guidelines on the environmentally sound management of mercury waste. The Zero Mercury Working Group, the International POPs Elimination Network (IPEN) and Health Care Without Harm (HCWH) called for the mercury agreement to build on the OEWG suggested framework.

BUDGET AND PROGRAMME OF WORK: UNEP Deputy Executive Director Cropper introduced the seven documents on the programme budget. Consideration of this matter will continue on Tuesday.

CHEMICALS WORKING GROUP

Co-Chairs John Roberts (UK) and Festus Bagoora (Uganda) proposed, and delegates agreed, that the Co-Chairs would merge proposed decision texts from the Executive Director and the US, and proposed amendments from Nigeria and others to provide a basis for the group's discussion. The working group will reconvene on Tuesday.

IN THE BREEZEWAYS

A spirit of optimism characterized the mood of delegates on Monday. Those following the mercury issue marvelled at the incredible about turn of the US, which announced its support for the negotiation of a legally-binding instrument. Several NGOs said they were "floored," others were overheard to whisper "yes, we can," during the US announcement. Many observed that the debate no longer related to negotiating an MEA or to expanding voluntary measures, but to including a provision to add other hazardous substances, such as lead and cadmium, at a later stage. Several delegates praised the US agreement to join the bureau, which in their view reflected the enhanced spirit of engagement, currently prevailing in Washington.