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ADVISORY GROUP ON ENVIRONMENTAL EMERGENCIES  
5<sup>th</sup> Meeting  
Geneva, 14 May 2003

**Joint UNEP/OCHA Environment Unit**

**RESULTS AND ACHIEVEMENTS  
2002-2003**

Note by the Secretariat

The Joint UNEP/OCHA Environment Unit is a collaborative arrangement between the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) that has now been in place for ten years, and serves as the integrated United Nations emergency response mechanism for activating and coordinating international assistance to countries facing environmental emergencies, and the environmental consequences of natural disasters.

The primary role of the Joint Unit is to rapidly mobilise and coordinate emergency assistance and response resources to countries facing environmental emergencies and natural disasters with significant environmental impacts. In particular, the Joint Unit is available to mobilise assistance for developing countries, when national capacity is exceeded or additional response resources and specialised expertise are required.

The Joint Unit provides assistance for emergencies such as chemical and oil spills, industrial accidents, forest fires, and other sudden crises with the potential for significant damage to the environment and human health and welfare including natural disasters such as earthquakes and floods.

When not faced with emergencies, the Joint Unit focuses its efforts on providing training and developing tools to assist countries to better prepare for and respond to environmental emergencies, particularly in the face of an increased threat of terrorism and potential chemical, biological and nuclear threats.

Based on a review of the Joint Unit's activities and mandate over its ten-year existence, a number of future directions for the Joint Unit were recommended. The following three priority

areas have been identified as the most important areas of focus and will define the overall the direction to the Joint Unit's activities for 2003 and beyond:

1. Emergency response/coordination and mobilization of assistance to countries facing environmental emergencies;
2. Support and influence better integration of the environmental dimension into OCHA's overall response to natural disasters.
3. Training and Capacity Building, with a focus on developing countries and countries with economies in transition.

## **Achievements in 2002-2003**

### **Emergency Missions**

The 2002-2003 period saw a resurgence in the number of requests for assistance put forward to the Joint UNEP/OCHA Environment Unit. In particular, the Joint Unit was able to mobilize assistance for or lend its expertise to a number of emergency missions including:

• Morocco	Inland oil spill leaking from a broken pipeline	February 2003
• Seychelles	Natural disaster – hurricane with serious impacts to biodiversity	January 2003
• Kosovo / Serbia and Montenegro	Phenol spill into river system in Kosovo impacting on Serbia	January 2003
• Syria	Dam collapse	June 2002
• Vietnam	Severe forest and peat fires	April 2002
• Democratic Republic of Congo	Nyiragongo volcano eruption	January 2002
• Republic of Djibouti	Toxic chemical spill in port area	January 2002
• Nigeria	Munitions warehouse explosion	January 2002

### **Integrating the environmental component into OCHA's response to natural disasters**

In 2002-2003 the Joint Unit has aimed to ensure a more integrated approach to disaster management by influencing the incorporation of environmental considerations in OCHA's overall response to natural disasters. To support this process, the Section has increasingly turned to United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC) teams to respond to environmental or technological disasters, such as the Djibouti chemical spill and Nigeria munitions explosion, and has successfully influenced the involvement of environmental experts on UNDAC teams deployed to natural disaster events such as a Nyiragongo volcano eruption in the Democratic Republic of Congo, to ensure full integration the environmental component into OCHA's response to natural disasters.

Concrete actions to enhance OCHA's overall capacity to address environmental concerns have been to:

- Develop an enhanced training module on environmental emergencies for delivery during UNDAC induction training courses
- Commission the development, in conjunction with UNHCR and CARE, of Rapid Environmental Assessment Guidelines for Disasters, for use by disaster managers and in

responding to all types of emergencies and disasters. This is also a useful tool for UNDAC team members in identifying environmental concerns when responding to natural disasters.

- Active involvement in plans and preparations, and the development of a substantial environmental scenario, for the annual Triplex humanitarian exercise involving some 70 participants for a number of countries and UN agencies. The inclusion of such a scenario sensitized participants from the particular environmental aspects that should be considered during the overall response to a major natural disaster and humanitarian crisis.

### **The Iraq Conflict**

In late 2002, the Joint Unit saw its role extend to addressing environmental issues in connection with awareness raising and the provision of guidance to UN organizations in the planning and preparedness phase leading up to the conflict, regarding the possible threat of chemical and biological weapons during the conflict in Iraq. The Joint Unit was also called upon to provide concrete guidance to national governments to ensure appropriate levels of preparedness to face the environmental threats of war, in particular the possibility of a major oil spill in the Persian Gulf, as was seen during the 1991 Gulf War. Together with UNEP's Post Conflict Assessment Unit, the Joint Unit contributed to UNEP's Desk Study on the potential environmental impacts in Iraq that is expected to be followed up by a number of on site assessments in post war Iraq later in 2003.

### **WSSD Type II Partnership - Partnership for an Integrated Approach to Prevention, Preparedness for and Response to Environmental Emergencies**

In early 2002, the Joint UNEP/OCHA Environment Unit took, in close cooperation with UNEP, the first steps towards formulating an international partnership that aimed to strengthen the international network for a more integrated approach to environmental emergencies management. On August 30, 2002 *the Partnership for an Integrated Approach to Prevention, Preparedness for and Response to Environmental Emergencies* was officially launched by UNEP and OCHA at the WSSD in Johannesburg, South Africa.

The Partnership has a number of key objectives that it aims to achieve, such as:

- Promoting the integration of environmental emergency preparedness and response activities into strategies and assistance programs relevant to sustainable development;
- Assisting countries in developing their own capabilities to deal with environmental emergencies and to facilitate information exchange, training and technological co-operation, and;
- Improving dialogue and mutual assistance among public authorities, the private sector and the public in general on issues of emergency prevention, preparedness and response

A project is currently underway that takes the partnership from the conceptual to the application phase, through the development of an implementation strategy and corresponding action plan that will be a major focus of discussion for the 5th Meeting of the AGEE.

### **Training and Capacity Building**

The Joint Unit, in partnership with the Swedish Rescue Services Agency, planned, developed and delivered the first PfP International Environmental Disaster Course. The objective of the course was to bring together national experts and to train them to operate and manage environmental emergencies of an international dimension, and to be aware of the unique elements of an international response. The course was hosted by SRSA at their training facility in Rosersberg, Sweden, and attended by some 30 participants from 15 countries. The pilot course

was very well received by those who attended, with suggestions on content and delivery provided through evaluations, which were used to revise and improve the course. This course will now become an annual event, with the next course scheduled for September 2003.

### **Other Projects**

In response to UNEP Governing Council decision 21/17, a project to conduct an analysis of the root causes, lessons learned and long-term effects of environmental emergencies in which OCHA and UNEP have been involved was completed and presented to the 22<sup>nd</sup> Session of the UNEP Governing Council in February, and is available for consultation. Consideration of this document by the Governing Council led to its important decision on "Further improvement of environmental emergency prevention, preparedness, assessment, response and mitigation", which creates a strong basis for further development of cooperation between OCHA and UNEP.

The Joint Unit's ten-year existence suggested a need to conduct a critical review of the Joint Unit's activities over the period. The resulting project "Elements of a Strategy for the Environmental Emergencies Section" reviews the activities of the Joint Unit during its ten years in existence and examines possibilities and opportunities for future work and direction.

In 2003, the Joint Unit finalized a major web site redevelopment with the goal of restructuring and expanding its information sources, to provide a better tool for information exchange during crises, and to make available useful resources and information to those seeking assistance in improving their level of emergency preparedness. The newly launched site has a new look and feel, consistent with other web sites of OCHA's Emergency Services Branch, and is broken down into clear sub-topics for easy access and use by users. The web site also has a new and shorter address and can be consulted at:

<http://www.reliefweb.int/ochaunep>