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ADVISORY GROUP ON ENVIRONMENTAL EMERGENCIES
Fourth Meeting
(Brussels, 20-21 November 2000)

REPORT OF THE FOURTH MEETING

1. The fourth meeting of the Advisory Group on Environmental Emergencies (AGEE) was convened jointly by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in Brussels on 20-21 November 2000, in accordance with the recommendations of the third meeting of the AGEE.
2. The meeting recognized, with great appreciation, the European Commission for hosting the 4th meeting of the AGEE at the EC Conference Centre Albert Borschette and for the provision of simultaneous translation services.
3. The meeting was attended by delegations from Brazil, Chile, China (People's Republic of), Denmark, Egypt, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, India, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Jamaica, Jordan, Kenya, Mozambique, the Netherlands, Norway, Pakistan, Romania, Russian Federation, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, United Kingdom, United States of America, Venezuela, and Yugoslavia (Federal Republic of) and an observer from Japan.
4. Representatives of UN/ECE, UNEP/Production & Consumption Unit, UNEP/APELL Programme, WMO, the European Commission and the Green Cross International also attended.
5. Mr. Gerhard Putman-Cramer, Deputy Director of OCHA Geneva and Chief of the Disaster Response Branch (DRB) of OCHA, and Mr. Donald Kaniaru, Director, Division of Environmental Policy Implementation, UNEP Nairobi opened the meeting welcoming all participants to Brussels each underlying the importance of continued cooperation through the joint initiative.
6. The meeting adopted the agenda as contained in document EU/AG/19.

7. The meeting unanimously elected Mr. Ulf Bjurman (Sweden) as Chairman, and Dr. Mohamed El Zarka (Egypt) as Vice-Chairman.
8. The Chair, in his opening remarks, recalled the history of the Unit's formation and the challenges encountered as governments reached agreement on the format and terms of reference for the establishment of the Unit. He also recognized the evolution of the Unit over the past eight years, particularly noting the success of the integration within OCHA's Disaster Response Branch, that effectively brings together the expertise of UNEP and the mandate of OCHA, thereby optimizing the use of resources while avoiding duplication and redundancy.
9. Following opening remarks by the Chair, Mr. Alessandro Barisich, Head of Civil Protection Unit, DG XI, Commission of the European Communities, presented remarks on behalf of the European Commission, emphasizing the Commission's longstanding support of the activities and structure of the Joint Unit, and the nature of cooperation between UNEP and OCHA. Further, Mr. Barisich noted the recent successful collaboration between the Unit and the EC in connection with a mining waste spill affecting Romania, Hungary and Yugoslavia. He underlined the importance of improving upon such cooperative initiatives and indicated the EC's commitment to a more formalized arrangement between the Unit and the EC to be pursued in the coming months.

Background on UNEP/OCHA Cooperation

10. Mr. Vladimir Sakharov, Head, Joint UNEP/OCHA Environment Unit, briefed the meeting on the history of the formation of the Unit, highlighting the original pilot project within UNEP and the government decision that recommended its integration into DHA (now OCHA). He particularly noted the value of this successful partnership that has afforded the Unit access to the environmental expertise of UNEP and the emergency infrastructure offered by OCHA.
11. Delegations expressed support for the Unit, its activities, and in particular the importance of the integration of the Unit into OCHA's Disaster Response Branch thereby ensuring a streamlined and non-duplicative international safety net for the response to environmental emergencies.
12. The delegation of the Russian Federation noted that the creation of the Joint Unit is a result of an earlier proposal, put forward by the Russian authorities in the late eighties. The activities of the Joint Unit have an important practical value for Russia. One of the great benefits is that through this joint initiative, OCHA and UNEP avoid duplicating activities, and are consequently saving resources. The delegate of the Russian Federation further recalled a recent Russian initiative at the UN General Assembly and the Fribourg Forum concerning the enhancement of international cooperation on response to natural disasters. This initiative is also related to environmental emergencies and the work of the Joint Unit.
13. A number of delegations, including delegations of Brazil, Venezuela, Jamaica and Iran, identified a need for a greater emphasis on prevention, preparedness and capacity building and, in particular, closer cooperation and alignment between the activities of the Unit and of UNEP's Awareness and Preparedness at the Local Level (APELL) programme for a more comprehensive approach to environmental emergencies.
14. The delegation of France, speaking on behalf of the EU, underlined its support for establishing a cooperative agreement between the EC and the Joint Unit to maximize efficiency and cooperation, to avoid approaching donors with duplicate requests for assistance for emergencies that strike within the EU boundaries, and to ensure a collaborative and harmonized approach to the provision of assistance and response to such occurrences.
15. The Chair concluded the agenda item by summarizing the discussion, noting that cooperation between UNEP and OCHA is both valuable and necessary, that the work of each complements and supplements the work of the other, and that the Joint Unit serves as an example of good and active cooperation between two

UN agencies. The Chair further recalled the difficult negotiations during the initial development of this service and the government meeting of 1993 that recognized the natural roles of UNEP and OCHA and the possibility for cooperation given the emergency capacity within OCHA and the environmental expertise of UNEP. The Chair concluded his summary by noting that the need for assistance is increasing while resources are limited, thus underlining the need for even greater cooperation to optimize the use of available resources.

Practical Results

16. Mr. Sakharov presented information on the Unit's activities and accomplishments, in particular highlighting the environmental emergencies in which the Unit has been involved in the past several years and its success in mobilizing and coordinating assistance in connection with these emergencies. Recent incidents of note include an acid spill from a battery factory in Mitrovica, Kosovo, two major mining waste spills in Romania that also affected Hungary and Yugoslavia, a petrochemical fire arising from an earthquake in Turkey, and a release of chemicals into the port area of La Guaira, Venezuela as a result of massive flooding.
17. Delegations were particularly interested in the provisions for emergency cash grants, and the protocol for accessing these funds when faced with significant emergencies. Mr. Putman-Cramer clarified the purpose and method for accessing these funds.
18. The delegation of the United States of America reconfirmed the original intent of the establishment of the Joint Unit, highlighting the fact that the Unit is not responsible for primary on-the-ground intervention, but rather for secondary response. It does not create its own stand-by expert groups, but relies on countries to respond to requests for assistance. The fact that the OCHA emergency number is also used to contact the Joint Unit should ensure, thanks to OCHA's close relations with donor countries, that the best expertise is available on request.
19. The delegation of the Russian Federation noted the importance of a renewed focus on forest fires recognizing their significance as environmental emergencies and the Unit's particular role in mobilizing assistance for severe forest fires faced by their country. This was further supported by a number of delegations including Brazil and Jamaica, drawing attention to some of the countries in Latin America that have experienced a number of devastating forest fires in the past several years.
20. Mr. Sakharov responded to a question posed by the delegation of the United Kingdom regarding constraints faced by the Unit in carrying out its activities, by indicating timely notification and access to precise incident information continued to be a challenge. Additional constraints include turnaround time from donor countries in responding to requests for international assistance, timeliness of mobilization and deployment of experts, readiness of affected countries to receive assessment missions and limited resources for the response to emergencies.
21. The delegate representing WMO supported the work of the Unit, also noting the particular role of WMO in prediction, modelling and early warning for environmental emergencies and natural disasters and in the prediction of haze patterns from forest fires. Further, WMO has access to national meteorological services all over the world through its international network. The delegate of the WMO acknowledged the good cooperation that already has been established with the Unit and supported the idea of regular testing of the existing interface procedures.
22. A number of delegations highlighted the particular role of OCHA in providing assistance to a number of environmental emergencies they have faced over the years.
23. The delegate of Iran expressed appreciation for the Unit's role in providing assistance to a number of disasters over the past several years including an earthquake, and most recently in response to a severe drought in August 2000, and for the provision of assistance for developing countries in general. Further,

the delegate of Iran underlined the important links between natural and environmental phenomena, thus stressing the importance of the integrated nature of the Unit.

24. The delegation of Yugoslavia lent its support to the activities of the Unit, noting in particular its long history of successful collaboration in the face of a number of mine tailings spills, the first dating back to 1992 and the most recent assistance in response to a mine tailings spill in Romania, that also affected several other countries. The delegation of Yugoslavia also noted with satisfaction, the Unit's involvement in a number of environmental assessments in the aftermath of the recent conflict.
25. The delegation of Chile recalled its first experience with the Unit following a severe river pollution incident in their country. In particular, the delegation of Chile noted that the Unit plays an essential role in the mobilization of assistance for such events and also underlined the need for a greater focus on prevention.

Governing Council Decisions

26. Mr. Sakharov provided an overview of the most recent Governing Council decisions related to environmental emergencies noting that the next UNEP Governing Council session is scheduled for February 2001.
27. The key decision 20/8 of the 20th session of the Governing Council expressed satisfaction with the constructive collaboration between UNEP and OCHA, requested UNEP's Executive Director to further enhance such collaboration by strengthening the Joint Unit, and invited Governments and UN agencies to continue to cooperate with the Unit.
28. The delegation of Switzerland recalled that the decision 20/8 of the UNEP Governing Council requested the Executive Director of UNEP to strengthen the Joint Unit and in this connection, stated that Switzerland supports the long-standing partnership between OCHA and UNEP and the maintenance of the Unit in its present format and location.

OCHA Services

29. Mr. Gerhard Putman-Cramer presented information on OCHA's services in the response to natural disasters and environmental emergencies, including the identification of emergency resources within the Disaster Response Branch (DRB) of OCHA and the increasing role of the UNDAC mechanism in environmental emergencies. DRB's emergency capacity includes the coordination and dissemination of information related to natural disasters through regional desks, access to international military and civil protection assets, rapid deployment of disaster managers to areas affected by natural disasters, its role in the response to environmental emergencies and the array of services and resources that can be accessed when disasters strike.
30. A question regarding the particular role of the Unit in rehabilitation following emergencies was raised. OCHA, though focussed primarily on response, does have a role in the initial stages of rehabilitation following an emergency, along with other organizations such as UNDP.
31. The importance of OCHA's and the Unit's close connection and collaboration with a number of agencies was reiterated, primarily to ensure harmonization of activities and non-duplication of service. These organizations include, but are not limited to, UN/ECE, UNEP/APELL, and OECD.
32. During the course of the discussion, the delegation of Switzerland committed to further supporting the Unit by providing additional financial resources, through OCHA, in support of its activities and the continued collaboration between OCHA and UNEP.
33. Mr. Putman-Cramer reconfirmed, on behalf and at the specific request of the Emergency Relief

Coordinator a.i., OCHA's continued commitment to collaborating with UNEP towards an enhanced role of the Joint UNEP/OCHA Environment Unit.

34. The Chair closed the agenda item by reconfirming the clear intention to establish compatible, collaborative, non-duplicative systems and together with Mr. Putman-Cramer, expressed appreciation for the delegation of Switzerland's kind offer of additional financial support.

UNEP Services

35. Mr. Donald Kaniaru presented information on UNEP's activities in environmental emergencies, introducing the meeting to UNEP's strategy on environmental emergencies and the corresponding implementation plan for the strategy. The strategy aims to strengthen UNEP's capacity to respond to environmental emergencies by enhancing internal capacities and linkages between programme areas and increasing the focus on partnerships with other UN agencies and bodies, and in particular its partnering arrangement with OCHA.
36. UNEP's contribution through the Unit was recognized by a number of delegations in connection with specific incidents faced in their respective countries and the success of the Unit in mobilizing assistance in response to these emergencies.

Future Cooperation/Programme of Work

37. Ms. Patricia Charlebois, Programme Officer, Joint UNEP/OCHA Environment Unit, presented an overview of the Unit's priorities and planned activities for the next 12-24 months. Priority issues for the Unit over the noted timeframe include: refinement of operating procedures and improved automation within the Unit for rapid and efficient mobilization of assistance, enhancements to the web site for use as a real time information exchange tool, expansion of the international network of focal points, and the development of new tools to assist countries in enhancing response preparedness.
38. The programme of work was endorsed by the meeting, in particular plans for working cooperatively with partners and developing additional cooperative arrangements/interface agreements.
39. The delegation of the Netherlands indicated that its government has adopted a policy document for a structured approach to emergency response and to enhance national capabilities, noting that this could also be used for accessing international assistance on a bilateral level, as well as through the Joint Unit.
40. The delegation of Switzerland supported the work programme as presented and underlined the importance of coordination and cooperation with all relevant partners and better integration of relevant existing mechanisms.
41. A question regarding the frequency of AGEE meetings was raised by several delegations. The subsequent discussion culminated in agreement to continue having meetings on a bi-annual basis with additional meetings in between when necessary.
42. The delegation of Jamaica raised a question regarding the two year cycle for the meetings and suggested that networking be intensified between meetings of the AGEE through increased use of Internet.
43. Further, it was suggested that meetings of the Unit continue to be held consecutively with other relevant meetings and that meetings of the Joint Unit and APELL be integrated into a single meeting, if possible.
44. The delegation of Finland noted their support for the Unit's programme of work, particularly noting their commitment and active participation in UNDAC system, and in particular in connection with environmental emergencies. Finland has provided extensive support of the activities of the Joint Unit in

kind by the provision of expertise and equipment.

45. The Chairman summarized the discussion in particular recommending that the Unit intensify public relations, that it recognize and track emerging trends, and that it focus on strengthening its close linkages with the APELL programme

Guidelines for Environmental Assessment Following Natural Disasters

46. The Guidelines were introduced at the meeting by way of a presentation by Mr. Joe Bishop, consultant to the secretariat, highlighting the need for such a document, its aims and objectives in the light of recent disasters such as the Izmit Refinery Fire in Turkey, the Port of La Guaira incident in Venezuela and Hurricane Mitch in Honduras.
47. Delegations expressed interest for the guidelines and felt that, in addition to serving as a response assessment tool, they also serve to provide clear pointers to emergency planners on issues to be taken into account during their planning.
48. The delegation of the Netherlands explained that the Guidelines should also make reference to the long-term effects from flooding, especially to soil contamination by heavy metal deposits.
49. The delegation of India expressed concern over the lack of availability of trained personnel (especially in industrialising countries) and expertise to conduct such assessments.
50. The delegation of Chile expressed concern over the classification of “False Alarm”, another example was used to explain this classification and his concerns were allayed.
51. The delegation of Jamaica noted that these Guidelines should be universally adopted, in order to streamline emergency reporting procedures.
52. Delegates requested time to carefully study the Guidelines and make suggestions and recommendations. Delegates were asked to forward their comments directly to the Joint UNEP/OCHA Environment Unit, in electronic format where possible.
53. The meeting was informed that Annex “C” – Hazard Type, Phenomena and Possible Effects would be distributed electronically.
54. The Vice-Chair closed the agenda item by expressing gratitude to Mr. Bishop for his presentation and work on the document, and requested delegates to forward any comments they may have to the Joint UNEP/OCHA Environment Unit within the next two months.

Developing a National Emergency Response Mechanism

55. Mr. Peter Belling, consultant to the secretariat, introduced this agenda item by referring to discussion paper EU/AG/25. Mr. Belling explained that this paper was prepared as a follow-up to suggestions made by participants of the 3rd meeting of the AGEE to an earlier draft, and that it incorporated all the suggestions that had been made.
56. Mr. Belling noted the document’s relationship to its companion publication, “A Guide for the Development of a National Environmental Contingency Plan”, and then outlined the main components of the document EU/AG/25. Mr. Belling noted that Part I of the document attempts to put the topic of environmental emergency response into perspective by looking very briefly at elements of response preparedness, while Part II looks at various response components in considerable detail. The document reviews examples of national environmental emergency response mechanisms, at minimum cost, and emphasizes the benefits of

integrating environmental considerations into overall decision-making processes used for any type of emergency.

57. Delegates commended the consultant and the Joint Unit for their work in this area and expressed the opinion that the document could provide countries with valuable information in establishing their own response system or enhancing already-existing systems.
58. A request was made by delegates to incorporate the theme of preparedness at the local level into the final document, with particular reference to the APELL process.
59. The Vice-Chairman summarized the discussion on the topic by noting that the meeting:
 - takes note, with appreciation, of a valuable paper prepared by Mr. Belling which, when completed, should provide useful suggestions for establishing a response mechanism for environmental emergencies, or for enhancing already-existing emergency systems;
 - recommends that the document be completed, as proposed, taking into account the suggestions made by delegates;
 - recommends that the document be disseminated to countries once it is completed, and that it be made available “on-line”;
 - takes note of the request made by delegates to incorporate the theme of preparedness at the local level with particular reference to the APELL process into the final document. The delegates favoured the completion of the document by having it make reference to the APELL process and its distribution to countries.

Other Business

60. Mr. Sakharov noted that the International Search and Rescue Advisory Group (INSARAG) has created a Regional Fire Group as a network which could be used by the Joint Unit in mobilizing assistance for forest fires and industrial accidents.
61. Mr. Sakharov also indicated that all kinds of support, including financial, are greatly welcome particularly highlighting a modest reserve fund on environmental emergencies.
62. Ms. Charlebois provided an information note on an upcoming African Natural Disaster Symposium, tentatively scheduled for mid 2000 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, that will be held jointly by the United Nations and the Organization for African Unity.
63. It was noted that the next meeting of the AGEE would be scheduled for late 2002.

Conclusions & Recommendations

64. The Chairman summarized the findings of the meeting with the following recommendations, which were fully endorsed by all delegates. He noted that the meeting:
 - Recalls the historical background of the Joint UNEP/OCHA Environment Unit’s initial creation and objectives, and reiterates the satisfaction of the Advisory Group in view of the continued success of the Joint Unit in demonstrating excellent cooperation between OCHA and UNEP, and providing considerable added-value;
 - Welcomes the continuing close collaboration between OCHA and UNEP in the area of response to environmental emergencies, combining the exclusive mandate of OCHA for the mobilization and coordination of international assistance, and the special expertise of UNEP;
 - Notes with great satisfaction that the longstanding partnership between UNEP and OCHA has reaped important benefits for both organizations including, but not limited to, significant resource savings;

- Recommends that the Joint Unit continue to develop partnerships and collaborative arrangements with other agencies and bodies for a holistic and harmonized approach, and in particular supports a strong linkage with the UNEP APELL programme;
- Underlines that the role of OCHA and UNEP in the provision of urgent international assistance for countries facing environmental emergencies is becoming increasingly important;
- Invites OCHA and UNEP to further reinforce their cooperation in emergency response;
- Reiterates that the Joint Unit be maintained, integrated in OCHA's disaster response system in Geneva, and continues to be considered as the UN system's principal response mechanism in the context of environmental emergencies;
- Requests the Joint Unit to continue focusing on practical assistance, on governmental request, to countries facing disasters with environmental consequences, particularly developing countries;
- Requests the Joint Unit to identify emerging trends in order to develop appropriate strategies, and enhance response preparedness capabilities to meet these trends and to address the environmental impacts of natural disasters on a systematic basis;
- Recognizes the necessity of appropriate financing of the activities of the Joint Unit, and the importance of a reserve of financial resources, that would greatly facilitate the Unit's ability to carry out its tasks when a significant emergency strikes;
- Asks the Executive Director of UNEP to allocate the necessary resources for the biennium 2002-2003 for the administration and operation of the Joint Unit;
- Further requests the Executive Director of UNEP to make available to OCHA's response mechanisms (e.g. UNDAC), a number of environmental experts, to be trained in OCHA's assessment and coordination methodologies and to be on stand-by for rapid deployment when appropriate/required;
- Welcomes OCHA's decision to establish the principle of equitable cost sharing with UNEP as far as staff costs are concerned, and to take over the funding of the Head of Unit post;
- Believes that OCHA's financial support to the Joint Unit reinforces the existing partnering arrangement with UNEP, and creates a truly joint venture between the two organizations;
- Requests the UNEP Secretariat to inform the 21st session of the UNEP Governing Council on major conclusions and recommendations of the 4th meeting of the Advisory Group on Environmental Emergencies.