

United Nations Environment Programme

Welcome

Dear Delegates,

Welcome to BUSUN 2009 and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)! It is my pleasure to greet this year's committee and I am looking forward to working with all of you on this particular area of global environmental issues.

My name is Kening Tan and I am the chair of your committee this year. I am originally from Nanjing, China and currently a sophomore at Brown University. I am intending to dual concentrate in Economics and International Relations with a special focus on the global environment. I have been involved with Model UN for five years. I was the founder and president of the Model UN Club in my high school and have participated in several national and international conferences in both China and the United States. Last year I was the director for the United States National Security Council, which was my first BUSUN experience. In addition to Model UN, I am also a member of Brown Undergraduate Council of Students and Brown University Gilbert & Sullivan.

I have special fondness for environmental issues, and I believe that the relationship between human development and environmental conservation is one of the most pressing topics of global negotiation in the modern world. However, the scientific and economic uncertainties of global environmental politics always increase the complexity of negotiation and even hinder international cooperation. Therefore, in the conference you all will have the opportunity to not only study international relations in a special way, but also to experience the unique challenge of addressing environmental issues at the global level. I hope that during the conference you will all present great ideas about the mitigation of environmental problems and gain a better understanding of global environmental challenges. This guide contains information discussing UNEP, as well as three topics you will face in the conference. I will also give you links to some useful online resources. However, it is necessary that you devote a considerable amount of time to search for information that is applicable to the nation you represent.

I hope this background guide is helpful, and please feel free to contact me if you have any questions. Good luck and I look forward to meeting you at Brown this fall!

Sincerely,
Kening Tan
UNEP Chair
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Committee History

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), functioning as a part of the UN system, is mainly responsible for assessing global environmental trends and promoting cooperation between UN member states on environmental issues. UNEP has played a significant role in developing international environmental conventions, implementing environmentally friendly policy and technology with governments and other institutions, working in conjunction with multinational non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and funding environmentally-conscious development projects around the world.

Besides the environmental programs it has sponsored in many developing countries, UNEP has initiated the creation of several treaties on global environmental issues such as transboundary air pollution, wild life conservation and trade in hazardous chemicals. UNEP also helped establish the International Panel on Climate Change and is one of the Implementing Agencies for the Global Environmental Facility.

Topic 1: Basel Convention: Hazardous Waste Trading

Background

Hazardous waste is waste that poses threats to public health or the environment, and includes many of the solids, liquids, and contained gases generated by modern industrial processes. Due to high costs of disposal and stringent regulations in some countries, the industrialized nations began trading hazardous waste internationally in the late 1970s and early 1980s. They took advantage of low transportation costs and the desire of less developed countries to earn foreign currency in the waste trade. The transboundary movements of waste were not recognized as a problem by the international community until richer nations' waste ships began to cause increasing environmental harm to poor nations, which led to the creation of the Basel Convention.

The Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and Their Disposal, simply known as the Basel Convention, is the most comprehensive global environmental agreement to control the movement of hazardous wastes between nations. It aims to reduce the negative effects of the generation, management, transportation and disposal of hazardous and other wastes; it also assists less developed countries in managing their wastes safely and in reducing the harm of wastes transferred from developed countries. The Convention prohibits the exportation or importation

of hazardous wastes between Parties and non-Parties. It also calls for an overall reduction of waste generation.

The Convention was opened for signature on 22 March 1989, and entered into force on 5 May 1992. It has 172 Parties, of which Afghanistan, Haiti, and the United States have signed but not yet ratified the Convention.

Current Situation

Though the Basel Convention addresses the global community's concern of hazardous waste trading, it is widely understood that the Convention is not as effectual as expected. The amendment to the Convention that bans the export of hazardous waste from a list of developed countries to developing countries has not been ratified by the required number of parties to come into effect. The Basel Convention also fails to regulate trade in some new wastes such as electronic waste. Other challenges that have arisen include difficulties in regulating waste trade under global free trade rules and the emergence of a "South-south" waste trade in addition to the original "North-south" waste trade, which makes global environmental governance more complex. In the conference, the committee should consider these challenges and work collaboratively towards solutions to tackle them.

Bloc Positions

The United States: As a non-Party to the Basel Convention, the U.S. is not legally bound by the regulating treaty and has been engaged in the waste trade. Levels of U.S. waste exportation and waste generated by U.S. firms abroad both remain high.

The European Union: The developed countries in Europe used to be large exporters of hazardous waste, mostly due to their early steps towards industrialization. Recently, the level of electronic waste trade from these European countries to developing countries has been increasing rapidly. All member states of the European Union are legally bound by the Basel Convention and its amendment.

Developing Countries: Developing countries' open policy of accepting hazardous waste from developed countries is mostly driven by the high profit to be gained in the waste trade. While some developing nations are still inclined to import wastes and to recycle or reuse them, others have realized that the harm of waste trading on the local environment outweighs its economic benefits.

Helpful Resources

- The official site of the Basel Convention www.basel.int

- Environment for Development – Harmful Substances and Hazardous Waste <http://www.unep.org/hazardoussubstances/>
- Basel Action Network www.ban.org
- Vital Waste Graphics <http://www.grida.no/publications/vg/waste>

Topic 2: Deforestation

Background

Deforestation, which is the logging, burning or other destruction of trees in forests, has been one of the major environmental problems caused by human development. The root causes of deforestation are rapidly expanding populations, urbanization, increased demand for farmland, and the global market for forest products.

It has always been difficult to estimate exact deforestation rates due to its various causes, but some scientists have predicted that by the next century all tropical forests will be gone if no significant preventive measures are taken at the global level. Deforestation of certain forest areas such as the Amazon basin is occurring at an even faster rate than previously estimated.

It is widely acknowledged that deforestation contributes to the degradation of ecological services provided by the forest, which results in environmental problems such as global climate change, soil erosion, irregular water cycles and loss of biodiversity.

Current Situation

Deforestation by Region:

North America: In the United States, most old-growth forests were harvested by 1920, and continuous urban development may cause a loss of 23 million acres of forest land by 2050. In Canada, more than half of the boreal forest has been allocated to commercial logging. Within the last decade, however, much forest re-growth has occurred in both countries.

Europe: Europe has a vast amount of deforested area. Hungary, Romania, the U.K, Austria, Ireland, Scotland, Russia, Finland, and Poland are eight major deforested countries. Deforestation in Europe is largely due to

increasing population and unsuccessful governmental management.

Asia: Asia holds almost 60% of the world's population, and tremendous population pressures have contributed to the region's substantial forest loss. The unsustainable economic growth of the past few years also resulted in the over-exploitation of forest resources. Recently, critics have argued that European and North American energy conservation efforts, which increase production of bio-diesel fuels, result in rain forest destruction in Southeast Asia.

South America: The development of cattle ranching, crop farming, and large road projects are major causes of deforestation in the Amazon rainforest. Another substantial factor is the incentive that the international market gives to large lumber companies. In addition, South American governments have been concerned about the relationship between forest conservation and national sovereignty and security

Africa: According to the UNEP, Africa is experiencing deforestation at twice the world rate. Illegal logging accounts for most clearance of forests. Regional armed conflicts as well as people's dependence on wood for fuel have both caused massive deforestation.

Deforestation Impacts:

Global Climate Change: Forests influence climate by removing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. Deforestation, therefore, is a substantial cause of increased carbon levels. Controlling deforestation could significantly reduce green house gas levels and thus mitigate climate change.

Soil Erosion: The loss of trees causes widespread erosion throughout the tropics. During heavy tropical rains the exposed topsoil on cleared forest lands is washed away. Rivers carrying eroded soil are threats to hydroelectric projects downstream, and erosion also decreases the overall productivity of land and affects global food security.

Droughts: The removal of forests causes a reduction in the amount of water returning to the atmosphere and eventually to the earth's surface. Therefore droughts occur in many deforested countries.

Biodiversity Loss: Deforestation of tropical forests could lead to the extinction of tens of thousands of species every year, most of which have great scientific and economic value. Both destructive illegal logging and trade in illegally derived

forest products should be stopped in order to reverse the loss of biodiversity.

Questions to Consider

1. What are major incentives that encourage deforestation in your country?
2. Are there any new challenges regarding forest conservation on a global scale?
3. What are some approaches that have been taken or can be taken for controlling deforestation at both domestic and global levels?
4. What impacts do some famous international agreements have on the issue of deforestation? (e.g. International Tropical Timber Agreement)

Helpful Resources

- United Nations Forum on Forests
www.un.org/esa/forests
- Global deforestation general information
<http://www.globalchange.umich.edu/globalchange/2/current/lectures/deforest/deforest.html>
- The International Tropical Timber Organization
www.itto.int
- Foundation for International Environmental Law and Development; Information about the mechanism of Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation
www.Field.org.uk/deforestation

Topic 3: Energy: Feasibility of Ethanol

Background

As the environmental impact of burning fossil fuels has been recognized by the international community, alternative fuels are becoming an increasingly attractive way to change the current energy use pattern. Among these fuels, ethanol has received the most attention. Although ethanol fuel is not the perfect substitute for fossil fuels and its feasibility has been questioned by many, it could become a more prominent part of the world fuel supply in coming years.

Ethanol is a renewable energy source derived from plants and can be produced from a variety of feedstocks

such as sugar cane, corn, and other biomass. Therefore, ethanol can be domestically produced. However, it is not a very efficient energy source; it contains approximately 34% less energy per unit volume than gasoline. Due to this fact, in many countries vehicles run on mixtures of ethanol and gasoline. Ethanol cannot travel in pipelines along with gasoline, and needs to be transported by trucks or trains, which is more expensive and complicated.

Current Situation

As the biofuel industry has bloomed in many countries along with the increasing price of gasoline, ethanol's public profile has been rising. However, some skeptics have argued that ethanol might not be a feasible solution to energy crisis. Some important questions include:

1. Is ethanol fuel more efficient than gas?

Ethanol contains less energy than gasoline. It should also be noted that the process involved in growing plants and then transforming them into ethanol requires a greater amount of energy from fossil fuels than ethanol can generate. Therefore, new technologies are in need to improve the ethanol industry and lower the price of ethanol production.

2. Does ethanol help improve energy security?

Though a preferable form of renewable energy, ethanol produced from corn and other grains is argued to be unreliable due to the likelihood of unpredictable climatic fluctuations and environmental change (e.g. droughts), which reduce crop yields and thereby affect ethanol production.

3. Does the ethanol industry affect the environment?

Increasing ethanol production would increase degradation of agricultural land and water. In the Amazonian region, the removal of tropical forests for growing sugar cane has caused soil erosion and aquifer loss.

4. How does ethanol production affect global food security?

The crops used to produce ethanol fuel are also important human food resources, and using them to produce ethanol increases the cost of food. The diversion of crops to the inefficient production of ethanol raises ethical questions, especially at a time when more food is needed to feed the growing global population.

Bloc Positions

The United States: The U.S. is the largest producer and consumer of ethanol fuel in the world. Most of the

country's ethanol is produced from corn, and the direct land-use change involved in growing biofuel crops has an increased environmental footprint. The government currently aims to advance biofuels research and commercialization.

Europe: European countries have been promoting ethanol consumption as an alternative to fossil fuels.

Asia: Most developing countries in Asia are still largely dependent on fossil fuels for their primary energy source. In the last decade, however, countries such as China and Thailand have expanded the use of ethanol-based fuel and have begun to export ethanol to Arabic and European countries.

Central and South America: Most countries in this region grow sugar cane to produce ethanol fuel. Brazil, the world's second largest producer of ethanol and its largest exporter, has advanced ethanol technology and continues to promote biofuel-based transportation. However, development of the ethanol industry has resulted in deforestation that threatens the local environment.

Africa: Though African countries are less concerned with ethanol fuel than other states, some governments have pushed to develop the ethanol industry by encouraging farmers to grow maize, which can be used to produce ethanol. On the other hand, global and local ethanol markets raise the price of crops, which in turn exacerbates the problem of famine in poor regions of Africa.

Helpful Resources

- Video: Ethanol vs. Gasoline
<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=954176347344619452>
- UN Chronicle - Ethanol from Corn: A Solution to Oil Dependence?
http://www.un.org/Pubs/chronicle/2008/webarticles/080111_ethanol.html
- Natural News - news and articles on ethanol fuel
<http://www.naturalnews.com/ethanol.html>