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INDIA: Urged to Lead UNEP Upgrade

By Keya Acharya

NEW DELHI, May 28 (IPS) - India is sitting out on an opportunity to take the lead in ensuring its own and developing countries' interests in the ongoing debate to upgrade the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) into a stronger body, says a leading expert on international environment law.

Bharat Desai, chair of International Environmental Law at India's prestigious Jawaharlal Nehru University here, says that since 1997 there have been a series of U.N. intergovernmental initiatives to turn UNEP into an authority with more direct influence in global environmental agendas.

According to an intergovernmental meeting of U.N. representatives in 2001, UNEP has been weakened by a proliferation of agencies dealing with environmental policies, both within the U.N. system and without, poor coordination amongst concerned agencies and the lack of a counterweight to the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

UNEP's funds, depending on voluntary contributions from countries, declined from 166.8 million US dollars in 1994-95 to 130 million dollars in 2004-05.

The number of contributing countries has also declined from 88 in 1997 to 34 in 2001, of which just 15 nations contribute the bulk, thus making UNEP vulnerable to major donors' interests.

In 2006, a U.N. high-level committee on the issue decided that, "an upgraded UNEP should have real authority as the 'environmental pillar' of the U.N. system... with broad responsibility to review progress towards improving the global environment."

The model being currently debated for turning UNEP into the United Nations Environment Organisation (UNEO), and put forward by the EU in 2005, is "literally identical", claims Desai, to the reorganisation proposal put forward by him to the legal department of the World Bank in 1999.

Desai's model, which he calls the U.N. Environment Protection Organisation(UNEPO), seeks separate expert councils on environmental law, science, technology and emergency relief, together with well-delineated funding and administrative powers.

The EU's UNEO model envisages a plenary body with executive, secretariat, consultative and regional boards and overall authority that can respond to environmental emergencies and execute priority programmes with 'predictable' funding.

Desai's proposal, subsequently published in the Indian Journal of Environmental Law (2000), has been indirectly acknowledged by its inclusion in the first intergovernmental meeting held in 2001.

In 2007, U.N. representatives of Mexico and Switzerland, as the co-chairs on Informal Consultative Process, invited Desai to present his proposal in New York. "The fact that the delegate head of the EU took six copies of my proposal, when I presented a comparative table of UNEO and my UNEPO at New Delhi in August 2007 speaks for itself," says Desai.

But the U.N.'s seeming recognition of Desai's strategy has not found favour with the Indian government.

"We do not want another bureaucratic U.N. agency that starts telling us what is to be done," said Dinesh Patnaik, director of U.N. affairs at India's ministry of external affairs. "We want more programmes, not multiplicity".

Patnaik, speaking with IPS from the recently-concluded G8 ministerial meet in Kobe, Japan, where developing countries India, China and Brazil agreed with the G8 that carbon emissions need to be halved by 2050.

India's ministry of environment and forests (MoEF), which is already facing criticism from the prominent environmental NGO 'Kalpavriksh' for weakening itself into a grant making body instead of administering environmental programmes, has nothing to say on the issue, its secretary Meena Gupta told IPS.

Desai attributes the government's stance to a lack of understanding of the implications of UNEP's reorganisation for India, and an 'outdated mindset' within the environment ministry that succumbs to the 'overarching presence' of India's external affairs ministry on global issues.

"My proposal takes developing country interests too into account. So why is there hesitation to present this as a counter to the EU's UNEO?" questions Desai.

But Patnaik says India is following every discussion closely. "Right now it is a discussion initiated only by, and within, UNEP. We will certainly take a stand if we find India needs to assert herself."

Ashok Khosla, chief of Development Alternatives, a well-known NGO, thinks that the "time has come for such a debate about UNEP", but several proposals need to be discussed and thereafter implemented.

The U.N. General Assembly is currently debating the issue of adopting a resolution on the restructuring of UNEP.

(END/2008)

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