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**IMPROVEMENT OF THE INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE  
TO ENVIRONMENTAL EMERGENCIES**

Report of the Executive Director

Summary

The present report reviews the implementation of Governing Council decision 17/26, which called for the development of a mechanism to improve the United Nations capacity to respond to environmental emergencies. UNEP and the United Nations Department of Humanitarian Affairs established the Joint UNEP/DHA Environment Unit following recommendations of a UNEP Governmental Advisory Meeting. The Joint Unit is facilitating the provision of international assistance, it is staffed by UNEP and is fully integrated into the existing response mechanism of the DHA Relief Coordination Branch, which has the mandate to respond to emergencies. This is a practical project which provides an independent backstop for countries facing environmental emergencies.

Suggested action by the Governing Council

The Governing Council may wish to:

1. Take note of the present report;
2. Express its satisfaction with and endorse constructive collaboration between UNEP and DHA in enhancing the ability of the United Nations to assist countries affected by environmental emergencies;
3. Welcome the establishment of the Joint UNEP/DHA Environment Unit;
4. Express its appreciation to DHA for providing the Joint Unit with emergency facilities and office space;

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\* UNEP/GC.18/1.

5. Note that the Joint Unit is rendering services in full accordance with recommendations of the UNEP Governmental Advisory Meeting, when international assistance is not otherwise provided within the framework of relevant existing conventions;
6. Welcome the establishment of the Advisory Group on Environmental Emergencies, and endorse its terms of reference;
7. Request the Joint Unit to further develop its activities and services in accordance with recommendations of the Advisory Group on Environmental Emergencies;
8. Invite Governments and relevant UN agencies, bodies and programmes to cooperate with the Joint Unit in its efforts to provide independent and unbiased assistance to countries facing environmental emergencies;
9. Request the Executive Director to allocate the necessary resources for the implementation of activities of the Joint Unit;
10. Further request the Executive Director to submit to the Governing Council at its nineteenth session a progress report on the implementation of the present decision.

## I. INTRODUCTION

1. In accordance with Governing Council decision 17/26 of 21 May 1993, extensive work has been undertaken to assess the needs of developing countries in terms of response to emergencies that affect or threaten the environment, and to examine current international response mechanisms. Gaps in the existing system have been identified and proposals made to rectify the situation. Extensive consultations with Governments identified the most appropriate needs. These include the need to utilize in the most efficient manner existing facilities and resources, the need to facilitate quick direct links between affected countries and potential providers of assistance and the need for rapid initial assessment in cases of accident. Countries indicated a preference for a simple mechanism in the United Nations to expedite the delivery of such assistance, including a single entry point to the system.
2. As requested by the Governing Council, a Governmental Advisory Meeting was convened by UNEP in November 1993. It adopted a set of proposals concerning the enhancement of the international response capacity to augment the existing international response system.
3. Taking into account these recommendations, as well as consultations with countries and United Nations bodies, UNEP and the Department of Humanitarian Affairs (DHA) decided to simplify to the maximum extent possible the administrative and technical arrangements that would permit the delivery of an environmental emergency service to the international community. It was jointly recommended by the two bodies that core activities and services should be funded and provided by UNEP through the existing organizational framework of the Relief Coordination Branch of DHA.
4. Under these arrangements, UNEP retains substantive responsibility for the work to be done and functions in an effective operational association with DHA. In accordance with this joint recommendation, a small Joint UNEP/DHA Environment Unit ("the Joint Unit") was established in DHA as of 1 July 1994, to deal with environmental aspects of emergencies. The Human Health and Welfare Unit was appointed focal point for the Joint Unit within UNEP headquarters.
5. At its 45th meeting, the Committee of Permanent Representatives to UNEP at its 45th meeting, considered the report of the Executive Director on the Joint Unit, endorsed the joint recommendation of UNEP and DHA, and requested the Executive Director to implement it for an initial period of 12 months and refer the question back to the Governing Council at its eighteenth session.

## II. ACTIVITIES AND SERVICES PROVIDED BY THE JOINT UNEP/DHA ENVIRONMENT UNIT

6. Taking into account rapid industrial development in different regions, it is understood that major beneficiaries of the implementation of this project are Governments of developing countries and countries with economies in transition, competent national organizations, industrial associations, as well as relevant United Nations agencies and international organizations.
7. The objective of this joint project is to deliver an environmental emergency service to Governments upon request. In full accordance with the recommendations of the UNEP Governmental Advisory Meeting, it aims to improve mobilization and coordination of the international response to environmental emergencies, by developing and implementing practical brokerage functions, and establishing an efficient information clearing-house. Other assistance tools include the provision of independent and quick initial and post-emergency assessment, utilizing resources of donating countries and partners. Since its establishment, as well as in the preceding experimental stage, the Joint Unit has assisted a number of countries in responding to a variety of environmental emergencies by using its tools and capabilities.

8. The Joint Unit is not a substitute for existing arrangements between countries but, rather, acts as a "safety net" being the "last resort" for affected countries that do not know immediately to whom to turn to in case of environmental emergencies.
9. The Unit recognizes the existence of specific international conventions of relevant organizations the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the International Maritime Organization (IMO) and others as having mechanisms for responding to emergencies in their areas of competence. There is no duplication between the activities of the Joint Unit and these bodies and conventions. Appropriate cooperation is being ensured between the Unit, other UNEP activities (including the work of the Awareness and Preparedness for Emergencies at the Local Level (APELL) programme of the Industry and Environment Programme Activity Centre; the Secretariat of the Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal; the International Register of Potentially Toxic Chemicals (IRPTC); and the International Programme on Chemical Safety (IPCS), the UNCHS (Habitat)/UNEP Task Force on the Continuum from Relief to Development, and relevant international bodies including IAEA and IMO.
10. Among major outputs in the implementation of this project will be a global network of national focal points, a roster of national capabilities as a part of the DHA Central Register of Disaster Management Capacities, a contingency plan for environmental emergencies, and a long-term strategy for the delivery of environmental emergency service to the international community.
11. In accordance with recommendations of the 1993 UNEP Governmental Advisory Meeting, an Advisory Group on Environmental Emergencies, drawn from the national focal points, has been set up jointly by UNEP and DHA to review the Unit's work and provide advice and guidance on its future activities. The draft terms of reference of the Advisory Group are annexed to the present report.
12. At its first meeting, in January 1995, the Advisory Group was informed about practical cases where the Joint Unit has assisted countries since its establishment in July 1994. In particular it was briefed on a major mission of a multinational team, organized under the auspices of DHA and UNEP, which assisted Russian authorities in assessing the consequences of a recent oil spill in the Komi Republic of the Russian Federation. The Advisory Group concluded that this mission was a good example of quick, independent and professional assessment, which highlighted the role of the United Nations in providing a backup to existing bilateral arrangements. The Group agreed that the mission demonstrated the ability of the Joint Unit to provide an unbiased assessment of environmental emergencies with a global perspective, and recognized that this approach is a valuable additional tool for the Joint Unit to use when appropriate.
13. The meeting of the Advisory Group was very positive and constructive, with the countries in full agreement as to how to improve the international capacity to respond to environmental aspects of emergencies through the Joint UNEP/DHA Environment Unit.
14. A periodic review of the implementation of the work programme and of the services provided will be carried out jointly by UNEP and DHA, with reports on the activities under this project to be submitted to their respective governing bodies, as well as to the Advisory Group on Environmental Emergencies.

Annex

DRAFT TERMS OF REFERENCE OF THE ADVISORY GROUP  
ON ENVIRONMENTAL EMERGENCIES

The Advisory Group on Environmental Emergencies (AGEE), established jointly by UNEP and DHA, shall:

1. Provide a forum for an exchange of views and experience, among countries, on questions related to the provision of international assistance for environmental emergencies;
2. Promote further development of international cooperation in the field of response to environmental emergencies, with special attention to specific problems in developing countries;
3. Identify and examine selected problems with regard to the provision of international assistance for environmental emergencies, which are of major concern to countries, with the aim to prepare appropriate suggestions and recommendations on possible actions at the international level;
4. Review the work of the Joint UNEP/DHA Environment Unit, and provide advice on its future activities;
5. Accept the following general provisions:
  - (a) Recommendations of the AGEE shall be submitted by the Joint UNEP/DHA Environment Unit to the respective heads of UNEP and DHA, for appropriate actions;
  - (b) The AGEE shall consist of representatives of designated national focal points; it shall be open-ended and kept as small as practicable;
  - (c) Individual experts and representatives of relevant international organizations may be invited to take part in meetings of the AGEE, as required;
  - (d) The AGEE shall meet as necessary, initially once a year;
  - (e) The Joint UNEP/DHA Environment Unit shall provide the secretariat to the AGEE.

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