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Policy issues: State of the environment

**STATE OF THE GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT AND CONTRIBUTION OF THE UNITED NATIONS
ENVIRONMENT PROGRAMME TO EFFORTS TO ADDRESS ENVIRONMENTAL
CHALLENGES**

Report of the Executive Director

Addendum

Post-conflict environmental assessments

Summary

The present report provides a summary of the activities of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in carrying out post-conflict environmental assessments pursuant to requests from the Governments concerned.

* UNEP/GC.22/1.

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Introduction

1. In May 1999, while the crisis in Kosovo was still ongoing, the joint UNEP/United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-HABITAT) Balkans Task Force was established to collect and analyse information on the consequences for the environment and human settlements of the military actions in the Balkans region.

2. The results of this work were presented in a report entitled “The Kosovo Conflict: Consequences for the Environment and Human Settlements” in October 1999. The report highlighted a number of important conclusions on the post-conflict situation in the area, and in particular singled out four heavily polluted environmental hot spots (Pancevo, Kragujevac, Novi Sad and Bor) for immediate humanitarian assistance. The work was financed by 12 European Governments and conducted in good cooperation with other United Nations organizations and the European Commission.

3. Reactions from a number of Governments, the European Union and international organizations were encouraging, and thus UNEP was asked to carry out a detailed feasibility study to define clearly the exact scientific and associated financial requirements for the clean-up of the hot spots. The feasibility study was finalized in April 2000.

4. At the regional funding conference of the Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe in March 2000, the environmental clean-up project of four hot spots was the only project in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia to be included in the list of Stability Pact projects for the region. Initial responses from Governments were positive, and financial support for further activities was pledged by several European countries. In 2000 UNEP was thus put in charge of the sole quick-start project in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. This environmental clean-up project has received \$12.5 million in financial support from donors, and is to be finalized by December 2003.

5. In the autumn of 2000, UNEP carried out activities in The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and in Albania, being thus able to present in December 2000 the reports entitled “Post-Conflict Environmental Assessment – The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” and “Post-Conflict Environmental Assessment – Albania”. During field missions to these two countries, teams of UNEP experts investigated three core issues: environmental hot spots; the impacts of refugee influxes; and institutional capacities for environmental protection.

6. In each country, UNEP found that decades of industrial development, combined with weak environmental management practices, had created legacies of pollution and environmental hazard. Each country being in the midst of a difficult economic transition, the need for international environmental investments was emphasized.

7. As part of the post-conflict assessments conducted in the Balkans, the first-ever assessment of the environmental impact of depleted uranium when used in a real conflict situation was carried out in 2000-2001 resulting in a UNEP report entitled “Depleted Uranium in Kosovo – A Post-Conflict Assessment” of March 2001. The report stated that analyses of the samples collected showed only low levels of radioactivity. Furthermore, the results suggested that there was no immediate cause for concern regarding toxicity. However, major scientific uncertainties persist over the long-term environmental impacts of depleted uranium, especially in terms of groundwater.

8. As a result of these scientific uncertainties, UNEP called for precautionary measures and recommended action to be taken to clean-up and decontaminate the polluted sites, to raise awareness of the local population, and to monitor the situation in the future. UNEP made an effort to inform both the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization Kosovo Force, in order to ensure that they had all the relevant information and recommendations to take necessary steps on the ground.

9. The work on depleted uranium in the Balkans was, however, not finished. During the Kosovo conflict, a few sites outside Kosovo, in Serbia and Montenegro, had also been targeted with ordnance containing depleted uranium. Following the precautionary approach advocated by UNEP and to reduce uncertainties about the environmental impacts of depleted uranium, it was evident that a second phase of scientific work would be needed.

10. This second phase started in September 2001 and was concluded in March 2002 with the publication of the report “Depleted Uranium in Serbia and Montenegro – Post-Conflict Environmental Assessment in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia”. The report provided additional information and reveals important new discoveries in terms of the environmental behaviour of depleted uranium.

11. The recommendations by UNEP remained the same as in the previous year and UNEP still called for precautionary measures. In particular, major scientific uncertainties persist over the long-term environmental impacts of depleted uranium, especially regarding groundwater.

12. Bearing in mind that depleted uranium was used in Bosnia and Herzegovina during bombings in the mid-1990s, UNEP accepted a request by the local authorities to start an assessment in September 2002, studying the impacts of those bombings, making it the third phase of depleted uranium related work in the Balkans. The final report is scheduled to be published in March 2003.

13. In December 2001, the Post-Conflict Assessment Unit of UNEP was established. The role of the new Unit was to extend UNEP’s work in the Balkans to other areas of the world where the natural and human environment had been damaged as a consequence of conflict.

14. The unit works within the Division of Environmental Policy Implementation to investigate the environmental consequences of conflicts, determine the environmental impacts of refugee influxes, and propose solutions for environmental clean-up. The approach to post-conflict assessments includes the vital step of working with donors to secure funds for follow-up activities, such as clean-up or remediation. In addition, it strives to keep environmental priorities on the agenda throughout the post-conflict reconstruction, support longer-term goals for managing natural resources, address environmental management practices and promote regional environmental cooperation.

15. The current post-conflict assessment activities by UNEP include the following:

(a) Humanitarian clean-up project at the environmental hot spots in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, which remediates the war damage to the environment in the places in Yugoslavia where the conflict in 1999 caused severe environmental problems that pose health risks to the local population;

(b) Strategic environmental assessment of Afghanistan to analyse the country’s environmental conditions following more than two decades of conflict and to recommend projects to improve the environmental situation;

(c) A desk study outlining the state of the environment in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, with the aim of identifying major areas of environmental damage requiring urgent attention and proposing remedial measures;

(d) Depleted uranium assessment in Bosnia and Herzegovina (2002-2003), which studies the environmental risks and impacts of the use of depleted uranium in military conflicts. This assessment follows similar work already conducted in Kosovo (2000-2001) and in Serbia and Montenegro (2001-2002);

(e) Databank for the Gulf region. The unit provides environmental database services for the United Nations Compensation Commission, which the Panel of Commissioners for the environmental claims of the Gulf War in 1991 uses to analyse and evaluate the progress and results of ongoing monitoring and assessment projects in the region;

(f) Albania: Sharra – feasibility study and urgent rehabilitation measures". This is a continuation of the unit's activities in Albania, which started in August 2000, when the unit carried out a post-conflict environmental assessment in Albania and in The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

Suggested action by the Governing Council

16. The Governing Council may wish to consider the adoption of a decision along the lines suggested below.

Post-conflict environmental assessments

The Governing Council,

Concerned about the adverse impacts of armed conflicts on the environment and eventually on human health,

Aware of the need to conduct rapid but reliable environmental assessments following conflicts, thereby ensuring the inclusion of environmental activities in the reconstruction phase,

Acknowledging that post-conflict environmental assessments, when made immediately after a conflict, assist in reducing the future risks for human health and the environment by giving correct data to the local population and to decision makers, by proposing action needed for clean-up, and by reducing uncertainty among the population regarding health risks from the polluted environment,

Noting with appreciation that the Executive Director has successfully launched several post-conflict environmental assessments since 1999, and that these were conducted in close cooperation with the local authorities and the relevant organizations of the United Nations system,

Noting that the post-conflict assessments by the United Nations Environment Programme to date have been fully funded by extrabudgetary voluntary funding,

1. Welcomes the action taken by the Executive Director in the area of post-conflict environmental assessments, including the establishment of the Post-Conflict Assessment Unit;

2. Commends the role that the United Nations Environment Programme has played in undertaking post-conflict assessments, including its role in promoting clean-up of environmental hot spots, in supporting the environmental activities of Governments in post-conflict situations, in raising awareness of conflict-related environmental risks, and in integrating the post-conflict environmental activities as part of the United Nations humanitarian assistance and part of the reconstruction efforts to war-torn regions;

3. Requests the Executive Director to further strengthen the ability of the United Nations Environment Programme to assess environmental impacts in post-conflict situations;

4. Calls upon Governments in a position to do so to support countries or regions in need of post-conflict environmental assessments;

5. Invites Governments and all other parties concerned, where appropriate, to provide the United Nations Environment Programme with such assistance as may be required in conducting post conflict environmental assessments;

6. Requests the Executive Director to report on the implementation of the present decision to the Governing Council at its twenty-third session.
