



UNITED NATIONS DEPARTMENT OF HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS
UNITED NATIONS ENVIRONMENT PROGRAMME
JOINT UNEP/DHA ENVIRONMENT UNIT

EU/AG/6

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English only

ADVISORY GROUP ON ENVIRONMENTAL EMERGENCIES
First meeting
(Geneva, 16-17 January 1995)

MINUTES OF THE FIRST MEETING

1. The first meeting of the Advisory Group on Environmental Emergencies was convened jointly by the UN Department of Humanitarian Affairs (DHA) and the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) in Geneva from 16 to 17 January 1995, in accordance with the recommendations of the UNEP Governmental Advisory Meeting of November 1993.
2. The meeting was attended by delegations from Canada, The People's Republic of China, Egypt, Finland, France, Germany, Indonesia, Jamaica, Japan, Jordan, Kenya, Mexico, Nigeria, Norway, Pakistan, Romania, the Russian Federation, Senegal, Sweden, Switzerland, Thailand, Tunisia, the United Kingdom and the United States of America.
3. The Director of the UNEP Industry and Environment Programme Activity Centre (IE/PAC) also attended.
4. Mr. Martin Griffiths, Director of DHA-Geneva, opened the meeting. In his opening statement he outlined the responsibility of DHA in responding to different disasters, irrespective of cause. He noted that until the formation of the Joint UNEP/DHA Environment Unit ("Joint Unit"), there was neither sufficient expertise nor administrative mechanism to respond to the environmental aspects of emergencies. He also stressed the collaborative nature of the project and pointed out that, having established the Joint Unit in line with the recommendations of the 1993 UNEP Governmental Advisory Meeting, the time had arrived to concentrate on supporting and developing the concept.
5. Mr. Jan Huismans, Assistant Executive Director of UNEP, made an introductory statement on behalf of UNEP. In particular, he reviewed some of the developments that led to the formation of the Joint Unit. He also announced the re-organization of UNEP which included the establishment of a new focal point for the Joint Unit in Nairobi. The focal point is the Human Health and Welfare Unit which is part of the new Division of Environmental Management Support.

IV. REPORT ON THE JOINT UNEP/DHA ENVIRONMENT UNIT

14. Mr. Sakharov introduced a note on this subject (EU/AG/2). He referred to major events that led to the establishment of the Joint Unit, and described its current work and planned activities. He paid special attention to examples of practical work of the Joint Unit in providing various types of assistance to countries facing environmental emergencies. In particular, the following cases were mentioned: Montenegro, where a dam containing toxic mining sludge threatened to burst; Turkey, where a large explosion at a municipal waste dumping site caused many deaths; Albania, where a train with imported pesticides was feared as presenting an environmental risk; recent Russian oil spills, which threatened to pollute the Arctic seas; Djibouti, where floods had carried away drums of toxic chemicals; the Gulf War aftermath, where widescale coordination was required. The examples focused both on the need for a flexible approach to assistance and the variety of environmental risk. For example, the Gulf War illustrated the need for coordination of UN agencies, a task that only DHA could reasonably achieve.
15. Mr. Sakharov noted that the assistance required in these practical examples are consistent with the principal functions of the Joint Unit as seen by countries, namely brokerage, clearing-house, and networking. In many cases, assistance takes the form of rapid, professional assessment of the situation which is provided in independent and unbiased manner.
16. Mr. Sakharov also noted the existence of the interface procedures between the Joint Unit and IAEA and that IMO had expressed support to draw-up similar interface procedures.
17. Delegates responded by welcoming the establishment of the Joint Unit, noting the good cooperation between UNEP and DHA in arriving at a practical and realistic agreement. It was recognized that the examples of practical experience of the Joint Unit fall within the framework of recommendations of a Governmental Advisory Meeting convened by UNEP in 1993.
18. The need for a long-term strategic plan for the Joint Unit was noted, as was the importance of further informal consultations with countries as a flexible mechanism to discuss approaches.
19. Delegates noted that the Joint Unit should work on further defining "environmental emergencies" to improve understanding of which situations would be dealt with by the Joint Unit.
20. The importance of a flexible mandate was noted as being the best way to ensure a realistic response to environmental emergencies. The need for a pragmatic approach was underlined. Delegates stressed that procedures to request international assistance through the focal point should be simple and practical.
21. Delegates also underlined the significance of the Advisory Group in helping to define the activities of the Joint Unit.
22. The importance of developing cooperation at the bilateral and regional levels was noted, with several delegates suggesting a regional approach being developed to improve response.
23. A hope was expressed that cooperation between the Joint Unit and the APELL programme would facilitate synergy between prevention, preparedness and response. The intention for cooperation between the Joint Unit and the APELL programme was emphasized, with one early practical demonstration being the possible joint updating of the International Directory of Emergency Response Centres which is a joint publication of UNEP and OECD. Delegates also noted the need to achieve synergy between prevention, preparedness and response in the activities of different units within DHA. In particular, the usefulness of early warning systems was emphasized as expressed in resolution 49/22B of the UN General Assembly on early warning capacities.
24. The Chairman summarized the discussion on the Joint Unit, and noted that the meeting welcomed

32. Delegates concurred with the need to encourage coordination and networking and noted that other organizations such as IMO and OECD could also be considered along with the bodies mentioned in the report.

33. It was noted that some countries maintain different focal points for operational and policy purposes, but that in other countries the focal points are the same. It was agreed that the onus is on countries to identify the most suitable focal points. Delegates accepted the need to review the interim list of focal points to ensure those nominated were still the most relevant for the Joint Unit.

34. The Chairman summarised the discussion by noting that delegates agreed with the recommendations of the report. It was accepted that countries need to take the initiative to identify the most appropriate points of contact and distinguish, if necessary, between operational and policy focal points. The list would also be disseminated widely to help provide a consistent approach by countries. The list would also be updated on a regular basis as appropriate.

35. Mr. Belling then introduced the section of report EU/AG/3 that dealt with the roster of special national capabilities for environmental emergencies. He highlighted the importance of maintaining information of relevant national capabilities to ease the identification of suitable potential sources of assistance, noting that such a roster should not be too detailed. The practical difficulties of maintaining up-to-date rosters prevented such an in-depth approach. Instead, the idea should be seen as a register of existing rosters, that could indicate general capabilities and special conditions for access to such capabilities. The register would be disseminated widely.

36. Delegates emphasized the difficulty in maintaining reliable registers and that the focus should be on providing a flexible approach adapted to each specific situation rather than relying on such a register.

37. Several countries noted that their ability to provide assistance in virtually every scenario meant that a list of capabilities is not of great value.

38. Mr. Dmitri Balabanov, from the RCB, stressed that the existing DHA Central Register of National Capabilities should not be seen as a roster per se, but as a list of national registers available which indicated the conditions of access to those services. This ability to know which resources are free, which need payment and which only need transport costs covered is an important consideration in coordinating assistance.

39. The Chairman summarised the discussion by taking note of the report, though expressed concern about the ultimate reliability of such lists. He asked the Joint Unit to proceed with their work on establishing such a roster, taking the concerns of delegates into account.

VI. DEVELOPMENT OF A FRAMEWORK FOR A CONTINGENCY PLAN FOR ENVIRONMENTAL EMERGENCIES

40. This agenda item was introduced by Mr. Sakharov as per document EU/AG/4, with the Vice-Chairman Mr. Franklyn MacDonald presiding.

41. Delegates stressed that the primary purpose of a contingency plan is to create structured reference material of inter-relationships and interactions between UN agencies and other partners. They also accepted the value of such a document in aiding countries to deal with the different UN bodies by identifying specifically who is responsible for what. As such, the document needs to be widely distributed.

54. It was also suggested that the Joint Unit provide periodical briefings for the Permanent Missions in Geneva.

55. In closing, the Chairman noted that the Joint Unit will prepare draft minutes for circulation among participants before a final version is articulated. He summarised the meeting as being very positive and successful, with the countries now in full agreement as to how to improve the international capacity to respond to environmental aspects of emergencies through the UNEP/DHA Environment Unit. He commended UNEP and DHA for ensuring such a successful fusion of expertise and their adherence to the recommendations of the 1993 UNEP Governmental Advisory Meeting. He stressed that the Joint Unit must stay focused, yet flexible.

56. Delegates thanked the Chairman and Vice-Chairman for their excellent work at steering the deliberations of the group. The secretariat of the Joint Unit was also thanked for their organization of the meeting and provision of concise and simple documentation.