

Combating Environmental Crimes

Approximately 50 experts from national customs agencies, police departments, and other agencies have

met in Geneva for a workshop on problems related to the enforcement of international environmental agreements.

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The workshop focused in particular on illegal trade and environmental crimes related to the Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and Their Disposal, the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer, and the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna.

The law enforcement experts urged the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) to take a leading role in coordinating efforts to combat the various types of illegal cross-border trade.

During discussions, UNEP noted that environmental crime "is becoming a serious global problem, even though the immediate consequences of an offence may not be obvious or severe." The "cumulative costs in environmental damage and the long-range toll in illness, injury, death, and extinction of biodiversity and continued depletion of the ozone layer may be considerable."

Among the experts' recommendations was the establishment of a liaison unit at UNEP to improve coordination and cooperation among convention secretariats, national law enforcement authorities, and international bodies such as the World Customs Union and the International Criminal Police Organisation (Interpol).

The experts also called for improved interagency coordination for the detection, investigation, and prevention of illegal trade and traffic as well as regular

exchanges of information to promote compliance with international agreements.

Countries that are Parties to the above Agreements were also encouraged to strengthen national laws against illegal trade under the three Conventions and to review existing border control measures with the aim of strengthening and improving prevention and detection capabilities.

In addition, the experts called for new scientific research to determine the extent, magnitude, and nature of illegal trade under the said Conventions.

In a background paper presented to the workshop, UNEP noted that the incidence of environmental crime has grown recently, partly because the implementation of new international environmental agreements has provided new opportunities for evasion and also because greater public and governmental awareness has led to more investigations into the issue.

Other recent developments have contributed to the increase. These include the global trend towards trade liberalisation and de-regulation, the economic upheaval in the former Soviet bloc and the rise of organised crime there, the increased participation in environmental agreements by developing countries that lack adequate implementation mechanisms, and the growth of transnational corporations among which regulations are difficult to enforce. □