**UN/ECE**

**Information Law on Pollution**

The Committee on Environmental Policy of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UN/ECE) agreed recently at its annual meeting for work to start on a new, legally binding instrument requiring companies to report to the public on their polluting emissions into the environment.

The new law will be established under the auspices of the Aarhus Convention – the UN/ECE Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (see also page 299). It is expected to require countries to establish pollution inventories known as pollutant release and transfer registers (PRTRs). Under PRTR systems, potentially polluting companies are required to report periodically (for example, annually) on their emissions of certain polluting substances to air, water and land, as well as on their off-site transfers of such substances for treatment or disposal. The reported information is provided in electronic form and made accessible to the public, including through the Internet, subject to limited exemptions. The new PRTR instrument is to be ready for adoption at the Fifth Ministerial Conference in the “Environment for Europe” series, scheduled to be held either in 2002 or 2003.

PRTRs have been extremely effective in reducing pollution – even though they only regulate information about pollution, rather than pollution itself. The US system, known as the Toxics Release Inventory, is one of the best-established PRTR systems. During its first decade, reporting companies reduced their emissions by one half, preventing over 600,000 tonnes of toxic chemicals from being released into the environment. Few countries in Europe have so far developed PRTR systems, though some have plans to do so.

To date, the Aarhus Convention has mainly focused on information held by public authorities, but it is expected that the main obligations arising from the new instrument will apply to the private sector.

Negotiations on the new instrument will start early in 2001 in an intergovernmental working group established for this purpose. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and business interests will be invited to participate, as well as intergovernmental organisations active in the field. (MJ)

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**Note**

* The Committee on Environmental Policy is a high-level committee of senior government officials from all the ECE Member States, which include Europe, the US, Canada, the five Central Asian States which were part of the former USSR, and Israel.

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**ECOSOC**

**New UN Forum on Forests**

At its session on 18 October 2000, the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) established an intergovernmental body called the United Nations Forum on Forests, to promote internationally agreed actions on forests at the national, regional and global levels.

The Council took that action by adopting, without a vote, a draft resolution (document E/2000/L.32) submitted by its President, Makarim Wibisono (Indonesia). The Forum’s objectives will be the promotion of management, conservation and sustainable development of all types of forests and the strengthening of political commitment to that end.

Bagher Asadi (Iran), who had chaired a final round of informal consultations on 18-22 September, introduced the draft text. At the end of a long week, he said, they had succeeded in resolving all difficulties, including the membership of the new body. The document before the Council contained the text of the draft resolution, which had been approved by consensus. Agreement had been reached on the establishment of the UN Forum on Forests as a subsidiary body of the Council composed of all Member States of the United Nations and of the specialised agencies, with full and equal participation, including voting rights.

He explained that the new body would initially meet annually, for a period of up to two weeks, with a high-level ministerial segment to be held for two to three days. The sessions of the Forum might be held at venues other than UN Headquarters in accordance with established United Nations rules and practices. Bagher Asadi noted that the distributed document contained wording from the draft text approved on 22 September 2000 in informal consultations. Due to the negotiated nature of the text of the draft resolution, the original text as distributed by the Council Secretariat was the valid one.

During discussions on the draft, the representative of France said that he – and the European Union in general – were not in favour of adopting a text that had not been