

Occupied Palestine Territories

Background

The Seventh Special Session of the Governing Council of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)/Global Ministerial Environment Forum held in February 2002, adopted unanimously a decision concerning the environmental situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (GCSS. VII/7).

The Governing Council requested UNEP to carry out a desk study as a first step in the implementation of this decision, outlining the state of the environment and identifying the major areas of environmental damage requiring attention.

One month later, during the preparatory ministerial segment of the Arab League's 14th session at the summit level in Beirut in March 2002, Klaus Töpfer, UNEP's Executive Director, presented the decision in his address to the ministers of finance and economy. He invited all

the member States of the Arab League to cooperate with UNEP in working towards achieving a scientifically solid desk study with a forward-looking approach.

In July 2002, during his visit to the area, the UNEP Executive Director agreed with both Israel and the Palestinian Authority on the framework for the desk study. Both sides indicated their willingness to cooperate with UNEP, and emphasised that urgent attention and action were required to address environmental needs in the region.

Mr Pekka Haavisto, former Finnish Minister of Environment and Development Cooperation, was invited to act as Chairman of the Desk Study team that was to carry out this assessment. The Post-Conflict Assessment Unit in the Division of Environmental Policy Implementation was the unit within UNEP in charge of this assignment.

The desk study team, comprising eight highly qualified and impartial environmental experts, was formed

during early Autumn 2002, and visited the region between 1 and 11 October.

The experts covered the following areas identified as the most vital for the environment in the region: water quality and quantity; solid waste; wastewater; hazardous waste; biodiversity; land use and land use change; and environmental administration.

In spite of the fact that the mandate for the desk study is the Occupied Palestinian Territories, as defined by the United Nations, UNEP has emphasised that the Study should have a positive environmental outcome for the whole region. It has therefore sought to make clear recommendations on how to improve the environment in a way that will be beneficial not only to the Occupied Palestinian Territories, but also to the region as a whole.

The 180-page desk study, which focuses on scientific and technical matters, was presented to the 22nd UNEP Governing Council from 3–7 February 2003 (see also report on page 58).

Conclusions

On 7 February the desk study was endorsed unanimously by ministers attending the Governing Council. The same decision also backed a package of over 130 recommendations aimed at improving a wide range of environmental issues in the Territories, including those identified above as the most vital for the region.

Klaus Töpfer noted that it had been the clear assessment of governments from across the world that the environmental situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territories was a real cause for concern. He added that it was also their wish that UNEP should work with Israel and the Palestinian Authority to remedy this.

He said that, "Our main hope for the region is that the conflict can be resolved and the suffering brought to an end. Environmental cooperation can be a tool in the peace process. Governments have asked us to act as an impartial moderator, when requested by both parties, to assist in solving urgent environmental problems with a view to achieving common goals." He added that, "The report and the recommendations ... could not have been possible without the cooperation of Israel and the Palestinian Authority."

The report states that the "alarming, conflict-related environmental problems are adding to existing pressures on the environment which include population pressures coupled with scarcity of land, weak environmental infrastructure, inadequate resources for environmental management, and global environmental trends such as desertification and climate change."

The recommendations include revitalising and reactivating existing environmental agreements such as the Joint Environmental Experts Committee established by the Oslo Agreements of the 1990s. The Study states that the Committee should identify environmental hot spots affecting both sides, and "recommend and plan realistic remedial actions with a clear schedule".

Updating the Palestinian Authority's National Environmental Action Plan and support from the international community for implementing it should be a priority.

Other recommendations include the following:

- implementing water-saving strategies for industry, households and agriculture;
- water modelling of the Gaza aquifer;
- repair of cesspits to reduce contamination of underground water supplies;
- construction of wastewater treatment plants;
- the establishment of regional solid waste authorities;
- strengthened cooperation to protect the Dead Sea, including the possibility of making it a World Heritage Site;
- immediate action to stop the hunting of migratory birds along the Gaza coastline and an intensification of efforts to conserve protected areas such as the Wadi Gaza.

The relevant Governing Council decision acknowledges the Study's conclusions by stating that it is "gravely concerned over the continuing deterioration and destruction of the environment in the Occupied Palestinian Territories" and "requests the Executive Director, within the mandate of UNEP, to implement recommendations of the desk study".

It calls upon governments and international organisations to "support the rehabilitation of the environment and



Courtesy: CMS Secretariat

reconstruction of damaged environmental infrastructure, and thus to assist the environmental authorities concerned in their efforts to address urgent environmental needs in the Occupied Palestinian Territories."

(The desk study and the UNEP GC decision on the Environment in the Occupied Palestinian Territories are available at www.unep.org.) (MJ)

