



COPing with POPs

The Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs) made its debut on the world stage in Punta del Este, Uruguay, at a meeting formally known as the First Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention (COP1).

More than 800 government officials and observers from some 130 countries, committed to ridding the world of POPs – some of the most dangerous chemicals ever created – participated in the meeting held from May 2-6, 2005.

COP1 was an opportunity for governments to reiterate their promises and ensure that the global efforts to reduce and eliminate POPs move forward energetically. The meeting had been conceptualised with several clear tasks. Key among them were to establish a process for evaluating future candidates to be included in the initial list of 12 POPs; to consider adopting or endorsing the guidelines on managing POPs' wastes that were adopted last year by the Basel Convention on Trans-boundary Movements of Hazardous and Other Wastes; and to provide guidance to the Global Environment Facility which serves for the time being as the financial mechanism

that funds national projects and activities for implementing the Convention.

COP1 provided an inspiring example of how countries can work together to find global solutions to global problems. While the advocates from the International POPs Elimination Network (IPEN) and other non-governmental groups have, so far, played the central role in focussing the attention of governments and the general public on the need to tackle POPs, it is now time for the governments to play their part.

A key outcome of the conference was the establishment of a POPs Review Committee. It will be responsible for evaluating additional chemicals that could be added to the treaty's existing list of 12 POPs. Norway nominated the flame retardant pentabromodiphenyl ether. Mexico has nominated a group of chemicals known as hexachlorocyclohexanes (which include the pesticide lindane); The European Union has proposed listing the pesticide chlordecone and the flame retardant hexabromobiphenyl. The panel will hold its first meeting later this year in Geneva and its recommendations will be forwarded to

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Panel of delegates at COP1. (Photo courtesy Stockholm Convention Secretariat.)

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India thumbing its nose at international environmental laws!

EVEN AS INDIA aggressively moves ahead to play a more visible role in global economics as a newly emerging power, it seems to have decided to sit on the very last bench where global environment policy, especially regarding waste and chemicals, is concerned. In what now is appearing to be a pattern, India is now thumbing its nose at the very laws and regulations it was at the forefront of helping develop just a few years ago. Two recent examples stand out. In the recent global negotiations meeting in Bangkok, on the SAICM (Strategic Approach to Integrated Chemicals Management) process, which is now evolving as the new umbrella mechanism to take forward the millennium development goals (MGD 2020) on the linkages between poverty and chemicals safety, the G77-supported proposal to seek a nominal eco-tax on the chemical industry was opposed by India, saying that we were already taxing the industry too much! Of course when it comes to asking for global funds to implement such programmes, we are frontrunners but pretend it is not our responsibility to protect the poor from the impacts of toxics.

In another shocker (at the technical and legal meeting of the Basel Convention, where issues of ship-breaking and waste trade were being discussed) India openly said that it does not wish to implement the Convention's guidelines on 'clean' ship-breaking, despite having helped draw them up earlier! This had been preceded by the Indian government ignoring a plea from the Danish government to return a ship named *Ricky*, which had arrived at the ship-breaking yard at Alang in Gujarat in contravention of international and Danish laws. It seems we are now ready to harbour international criminals.

Clearly, the Indian government feels that while it vies for global economic visibility and global capital inflows, it can play hooky not only with national but also international environmental laws and concerns. It does not seem to be an area where we want to be seen to be responsible, even though we are bending backwards to provide a 'healthy' investment climate to corporations.

Ravi Agarwal

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future annual meetings of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention.

The meeting further agreed on a mechanism to evaluate the Convention's progress in reducing the levels of POPs in the environment. It established a system for requesting and registering temporary exemptions to the phase-out of certain chemicals.

One of the chemicals already targeted by the Convention is DDT. It was encouraging that some Parties recognised the importance of public health measures and non-chemical alternatives to address the problems posed by intentionally produced POPs. Of concern, however, was the resistance by some countries to take adequate measures to eliminate their reliance on DDT. Although the meeting finally recognised that some 25 countries will need to continue spraying controlled amounts of DDT to combat malaria-carrying mosquitoes, the progress being made on developing safe, affordable and locally effective alternatives to DDT will be reviewed again in three years.

The meeting also laid the necessary legal groundwork for providing parties from developing countries with financial and technical resources to cover the full incremental costs associated with fulfilling their obligations under the Stockholm Convention.

In the context of the elimination and reduction of unintentionally produced POPs (for example, dioxins), the Parties recognised that more work was necessary to improve the guidelines for eliminating and reducing them. These guidelines are crucial because of their implications for public health and their role in determining how financial resources will be allocated.

On the issue of disposal of POPs' wastes, yet another crucial area, COP1 acknowledged that more work was necessary to improve the guidelines for the management of POPs stockpiles and wastes. The recognition by the participants of the importance of continued and close cooperation and coordination with the Basel Convention in further improving and developing these guidelines deserves applause.

Of special relevance to civil society groups is the agreement by parties to keep the Convention promise of full access to information, transparency and public participation in Convention implementation activities. Many governments maintained an open dialogue with civil society groups throughout the Conference, and committed themselves toward building a transparent, participatory process for implementation of the Convention. This cooperative spirit and practice directly contributed to the success of COP1.

It is hoped that in the years to come, countries will live up to their commitments and make continued efforts to rid the world of POPs, not limiting themselves to just the 12 listed and the four nominated chemicals, but many other substances that are widely used and known to have POPs characteristics, including other brominated flame retardants; dicofol; endosulfan; perfluorinated chemicals, including but not limited to perfluorooctane sulfonate (PFOS); chlorinated paraffins; organotins; brominated dioxins and bromo-chloro-dioxins; polychlorinated naphthalenes (PCN); and octachlorostyrene (OCS).

Upasana Chaudhry

Toxics Link is a Participating Organisation of IPEN

FEATURES

Stop regressive changes to the Environment Clearance Process in India

A country-wide network of concerned individuals and organisations has appealed to the Prime Minister of India to stop the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) from becoming a mere rubber stamp for clearing unsustainable and environmentally destructive development and infrastructure projects.

A case in point is the environment clearance granted to asbestos factories despite indisputable global evidence that asbestos causes asbestosis, lung cancer and mesothelioma. The industry-sponsored scientific controversy over the role of asbestos fibre types in India has made the experience of exposed workers and citizens in asbestos-

affected communities invisible, allowing the industry to escape accountability.

The Sethusamudram project, which will adversely affect the lives of 4,00,000 fisherfolk, is another example of haste where discretion should be exercised. A recent Supreme Court decision has revealed that about 500 large industrial and mining units are operating across the country without any statutory clearances. These, and dozens of other recent instances, point to the failure of the MoEF to fulfill its basic aim – to safeguard India's environment.

Individuals, peoples' groups and NGOs from all over the country have had a decade of frustrating experiences with the Ministry's ways of granting environmental clearances to projects. Repeated attempts to get the MoEF to make the clearance process more participatory have been met with silence or rejection.

Of greatest concern today is MoEF's proposal to further weaken the Environment Impact Assessment Notification that governs the process of granting environment clearances. The Ministry is proposing a process of 're-engineering', which is explicitly oriented to cater to the interests of investors, blatantly overriding the rights of citizens to meaningfully participate in these processes. The result of this is nothing short of creating a context where decisions will significantly compromise environmental and social justice concerns, and critically undermine access to a reasonable quality of life and environment for all.

Through this Open Letter (*given alongside*), groups and individuals from all over the country jointly urge the Prime Minister of India to immediately intervene and stop the MoEF from going through with these regressive and potentially undemocratic changes in the environmental clearance mechanism.

Gopal Krishna

Open Letter to the Prime Minister of India

The MoEF has degenerated from being a regulatory body to a mere clearing agency, granting environmental clearance to projects without considering their impacts and by overriding the concerns raised by local communities. This completely disregards the need for prior informed consent of local communities before granting clearance to development and industrial projects. Further, the MoEF has repeatedly failed to ensure strict compliance of environmental norms by project authorities.

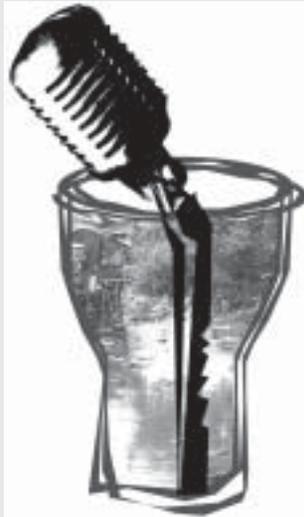
Now, it is on the verge of 're-engineering' the Environment Clearance (EC) process to suit the needs of investors and which will severely compromise the ecological security of our country and the space for the meaningful involvement of local communities and citizens in the decision-making of development projects.

We urge the Prime Minister to intervene and stop the MoEF from going through with these regressive changes in the EC process.

Respected Sir,

We applaud your signal role in addressing the serious crisis India's wildlife is in by appointing a Tiger Task Force, immediately responding to revelations of the shocking decline in tiger population. In many ways, this significant initiative is indicative of the worsening state of affairs in the environmental governance scenario of India. We sincerely believe that if the massive institutional infrastructure and technical bureaucracy that has been built over the decades under the Union Ministry of





“Sadly, the MoEF has degraded itself into a project clearing house, from the environment protection and regulatory agency which it was supposed to be.

Political expediency is often the basis of its decisions, not sound science, human rights, good governance and precautionary principles”

Environment and Forests had in fact delivered, we would have been a proud and greener nation today. A healthy and growing population of tigers would have demonstrated that our forests are well, and the country as a whole has worked to ensure balance between nature's ways and human development.

Unfortunately, India is amongst the leading nations that have significantly compromised the natural resource base with industrial, infrastructure and urban developments. A most troubling feature of this disastrous process is that the MoEF, specifically entrusted to protect our environment for posterity, has become an agency to aggressively promote highly destructive developments. Poor and forest-dependent communities are worst hit, as the

stability of our forests and rivers is at stake.

The MoEF has a critical role in repeatedly flagging environmental and social justice concerns when other rungs of government overstep in their zeal to deliver on developmental objectives. It has to ensure that there is no fundamental compromise of the long term ecological security of the country, an irreversible process with disastrous economic, political and demographic consequences. The importance of this task cannot be overstated and this demands constant and rigorous monitoring, honest reporting and critical reasoning to take decisions that may appear momentarily unpopular, but in the long run safeguard the country's interests.

Sadly, the MoEF has degraded itself into a project clearing house, from the environment protection and regulatory agency which it was supposed to be. Political expediency is often the basis of its decisions, not sound science, human rights, good governance and precautionary principles.

A disastrous trend of clearing projects without understanding impacts

An outstanding representation of such expedient behaviour is the highly questionable clearance accorded recently to the controversial Sethusamudram project in gross violation of environmental laws. The clearance was issued even as your office was reviewing the project and had raised very crucial and pertinent queries and sought clarifications relating to the impacts of the project in the post-Tsunami context, as significant changes have occurred in the seabed. Without addressing such critical concerns, the project is now being prepared for inauguration, completely discarding widespread concerns. It is widely acknowl-

edged that this project can severely compromise the geological structure and ecology along the southern axis of the East Coast of India. It directly threatens the livelihood of over 4 lakh people dependent on fisheries in India and Sri Lanka, whose involvement in decisions relating to the project has been systematically marginalised.

Another recent and compelling revelation of the extent of complicity of the Ministry in violation of environmental laws was illustrated during the ongoing litigation before the Hon'ble Supreme Court in W.P. (Civil) No. 460 of 2004, Goa Foundation vs UOI. When demanded by the Hon'ble Court, the Ministry was strained to reveal, in the first instance, that about 500 large industrial and mining units were operating without statutory clearances across the country. This lack of



“Attempts to open up and deepen the process of debate were stiffly resisted. This included resorting to evicting representatives of grassroots organisations who demanded their involvement in the “official” consultations held during November 2004”

compliance is causing irreparable damage to the environment and to human health across the country. That MoEF produced the list without much delay. This shockingly reveals that it was always aware of the gross scale of violations, knew who the violators were, and yet, was unwilling to initiate action as per the law. Even after producing this list to the Hon'ble Court, the Ministry hesitated on proceeding against the violators, and did so only when explicitly directed by the Hon'ble Court.

The list of violators presented in this case is but a small fraction of all violators spread across the country. Much as the Ministry is equipped to deal with this situation, it is the lack of willingness and clear leadership that is blocking this possibility. Such lax approach is contributing to pollution of our rivers and seas and aiding the destruction of forests, bio-diversity and traditional wisdom of this country. As a consequence it is systematically diminishing people's access to a reasonable quality of life and environment.

Ministry undeterred despite repeated Open Letters calling its attention to environmental degradation and institutional complicity

We have repeatedly engaged with the Ministry at different levels and in many different ways to ensure improvement of environmental decision-making in India. Over the past year alone concerted and collective efforts resulted in a series of four Open Letters addressing such issues of critical concern as wildlife conservation, the Draft National Environmental Policy (NEP), problematic environmental clearance mechanisms and skewed representation of experts on clearance panels.

Over hundred experts and environmental



“A recent Ministry proposal on ‘Re-engineering of the Environmental Clearance Mechanism’ promotes the dilution of provisions that ensure participation of the public, and grossly undermines the possibility of informed decision-making”

and social justice groups endorsed these letters to the Secretary, MoEF. Despite these exhaustive efforts, there was no response from the Ministry. Instead the Ministry continued to pursue its present persuasion.

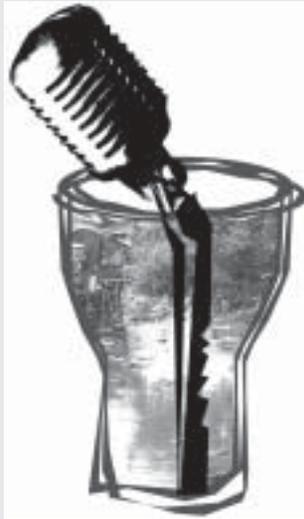
An excellent example of how little the present leadership cares to consider informed opinion is the manner in which the Draft NEP was evolved. The announcement seeking comments on such a critical document, one that lays the foundation for the future of India's ecological security, was made in a mere one line mention on the Ministry's website on the eve of Independence Day last year. Our collective succeeded in drawing widespread attention to this draft policy and generate a variety of responses. But the Ministry chose to incorporate mainly those comments borne out of its “official

consultations”. These meetings were mostly held behind closed doors and had very poor participation. Attempts to open up and deepen the process of debate were stiffly resisted. This included resorting to evicting representatives of grassroots organisations who demanded their involvement in the “official” consultations held during November 2004.

Proposal to re-engineer Environmental Clearance: A real threat to our environment

As the Draft NEP was debated, the Ministry discreetly issued a very poorly drafted note entitled ‘Re-engineering of the Environmental Clearance Mechanism’. This document is the basis of a comprehensive reform of the Environmental Impact Assessment Notification, 1994, a key statute that governs a major function of the Ministry: that of monitoring environmental impacts of development and regulating clearance conditions. This proposal promotes the serious dilution of significant provisions that support accessing information and ensuring participation of the public and affected population, and thereby grossly undermines the possibility of informed decision-making.

Guided almost entirely by recommendations of the Govindarajan Committee on Investment Reforms, constituted by the previous NDA government, and proposals made as part of the World Bank funded Environmental Management Capacity Building Programme, the process of “reengineering” has the explicit objective of mainly promoting speedy clearance mechanisms to assist investors. When the objective should have been to use the deep and varied experiences over the past decade to strengthen public involvement and review of environmental decisions, it is instead intent



“The proposed changes are oriented to provide final environmental clearances to projects in less than a year from application. This makes a mockery of the very objective of environmental impact assessment, as the scientific procedures involved demand generally at least a year to study potential impacts across all seasons”

on seriously watering down the existing provisions, which are already weak.

We highlight some components of this proposal to indicate the seriousness of the matter:

1. The proposed changes are oriented to provide final environmental clearances to projects in less than a year from application. This makes a mockery of the very objective of environmental impact assessment, as the scientific procedures involved demand generally at least a year to study potential impacts across all seasons. Unless this data is available, there is little likelihood of making an accurate assessment of the nature of the impact, its adverse fallout in the short and long term and identifying key features of a

reliable environmental management plan.

2. A shocking aspect of this proposal is that the Ministry proposes to entrust to investors the role of sharing project information and organising Statutory Environmental Public Hearings. This provides the investor an opportunity to politicise and polarise the investment decision in its favour, as it requires that the “project proponent will submit the summary of the draft EIA... and invite comments/suggestions/objections over a period of 30 days”. This is a clear breach of administrative norms and grossly violates constitutional mandates for forming decisions based on independent review by regulatory agencies.

3. Another glaring instance of the Ministry handing over key governance roles to the investor, thereby dismissing the due role of constitutionally empowered agencies in decision-making, is evident in the following component of the proposal: “Upon completion of 30 days time inviting comments, etc., the project proponent will initiate action for conducting the P(ublic) H(earing). Project Proponent will have to ensure that the PH will be chaired by the concerned Panchayat President, DM, Local MLA, MP, an expert from a notified panel, high level official of the concerned SPCB or any prominent recognised citizen from the local area.” This is nothing short of guaranteeing investor induced pressures will influence the decision, including even, as is widely experienced already, of intimidating affected communities from participating freely, especially when they are critical of the investment. The MoEF, by the Environment Protection Act, is bound to conduct review functions independent of any influence and engage elected or constitutionally empowered bodies such as Panchayats or District Planning Committees in its review mechanisms. Instead, the

present proposal wholly entrusts this task to the investor, who in all likelihood will ensure that the result will favour the investment, potentially creating a widespread situation of undermining environmental and human rights concerns.

There are many other such instances which are detailed in annexure 2, while annexure 1 presents our vision of what reforms ought to have been. The above references to the proposed ‘Re-engineering of Environmental Clearance Mechanisms’ have been made mainly to highlight how, if implemented, the reforms would severely erode a core tenet of democratic governance: that of independent, transparent and technical review. It supports a paradigm of development that will result in an extremely skewed distribution of benefits and costs, concentrate further adverse impacts on the disadvantaged communities and increase the pace of despoilation of nature and livelihood support systems. It is clear that the MoEF is parcelling out those decision-making roles to investors that should remain the preserve of government and regulatory agencies.

We have reason to believe that this proposal is now in the final stages of notification. We have repeatedly addressed the Ministry that this is a proposal that is deeply flawed and unconstitutional, but have not received any response. Deeply troubled by this silence, and fearing this implies the Ministry is pushing forth these most controversial reforms in clear contradiction of the UPA manifesto, we approach you with the request to intervene and stay this proposal till there is widespread debate and consensus.

By way of this letter we appeal for your immediate intervention so the environmentally and socially regressive processes engaged in by the Ministry of Environment and Forests are stopped. We hope you will

respond to our concerns with due dispatch, and thank you for your indulgence in our collective concerns.

Environmental Clearance Watch Campaign

On behalf of:

1. Latha A., Chalakudy Puzha Samrakshana Samithi, Thrissur
2. Keya Acharya, Journalist, Bangalore
3. Ramesh Agarwal, Lok Shakti Samiti, Raigarh, Chhatisgarh
4. Bamang Anthony/Keipa Raja, Arunachal Citizens' Right, Arunachal Pradesh
5. Sukhendu Deb Barma/Francis Hrangkhawl, Indigenous Tribal Peoples' Development Centre, Tripura
6. Udayashankar C., Hyderabad
7. Keshab Krishna Chhatradhara/Monoj Gogoi/Binay Kumar Tamuli, Peoples' Movement for Subansiri Valley, Assam
8. Johan Doley/Pramananda Chengia, Takam Mishing Poro Kebang (TMPK), Assam
9. Madhumita Dutta, Corporate Accountability Desk, The Other Media, New Delhi
10. Dino Dympep, Meghalaya People's Human Rights Council, Meghalaya
11. Ashish Fernandes, Ecologist Asia, Mumbai
12. Sanjay Kishore Gogoi, Bhumi Putra Bhumi Adhikaar Suraksha Samiti, Assam
13. Kalpana Hazarika, Subansiri Sangrakshak Naari Sontha, Assam
14. Pandurang Hegde, Appiko Movement, Sirsi, Karnataka
15. Nityanand Jayaraman, Independent Researcher and journalist, Chennai
16. Bharath Jairaj, Citizen consumer and civic Action Group (CAG), Chennai
17. Ratan Lal Kaka, Matheran Bachao Samiti
18. Reli Kena, Dolok Bango Indigenous Peoples' Forum, Arunachal Pradesh
19. Ashish Kothari/Kanchi Kohli/Manju Menon, Kalpavriksh, Pune/Delhi
20. Gopal Krishna, Toxics Link, New Delhi
21. Kavitha Kuruganti, Centre for Sustainable Agriculture, Secunderabad
22. Bhawani Shankar Kusum, Gram Bharati Samiti, Amber, Jaipur
23. Souparana Lahiri, Delhi Forum, New Delhi
24. Roy Laifungbam/Rita Boro/Anna Pinto, Centre for Organisation Research and Education (CORE), Manipur
25. Umakanta Leitanthem, Threatened Indigenous Peoples' Society, Manipur
26. Domin Loya/Dr Tado Karlo, NEFA Indigenous Human Rights Organisation, Arunachal Pradesh
27. Harsh Mander, Centre for Equity Studies, New Delhi
28. Samir Mehta, Bombay Environmental Action Group, Mumbai
29. Biswajit Mohanty, Wildlife Society of Orissa, Orissa
30. Praveen Mote, Samatha, Hyderabad
31. Zohra Mutabanna, Volunteer, Boston
32. Arun P.R., Environment Justice Initiative, Mumbai
33. Ananth Padmanabhan, Greenpeace, Bangalore
34. Kinderson Pamei/Arup Saikia/Zakir Kibria/Tashi Tsering, Brahmaputra Barak Rivers Watch, Assam
35. Mahesh Pandya, Centre for Social Justice/Paryavaranmitra, Ahmedabad
36. Raj Panjwani, Advocate, Supreme Court of India, New Delhi
37. Rup J. Pater, Echo of Arunachal, Arunachal Pradesh
38. Rohit Prajapati, Paryavaran Suraksha Samiti, Gujarat
39. Salam Rajesh, Manipur Nature Society, Imphal
40. Ramachandran Balachandran, Independent Researcher
41. Capt J. Rama Rao, Movement for Sustainable Development, Hyderabad
42. Leo Saldanha/Bhargavi S.Rao, Environment Support Group, Bangalore
43. Bittu Sahgal, Sanctuary Magazine, Mumbai
44. Madhu Sarin, Independent Consultant, Chandigarh
45. Aarthi Sridhar, Independent Researcher, Bangalore
46. Indu Prakash Singh, National Forum for Housing Rights, New Delhi
47. Arpan Sharma, Samrakshan Trust, New Delhi/Madhya Pradesh/Meghalaya
48. T. Mohan, Advocate Chennai
49. Likha Taji, All Nyishi Students' Union, Arunachal Pradesh
50. S.S. Talwar, Emeritus Scientist, Indian Institute of Technology, Mumbai
51. Himanshu Thakkar, South Asia Network on Dams, Rivers & People (SANDRP), Delhi
52. Vimal, Matu Peoples' Organisation, Delhi
53. Ramananda Wangkheirakpam, Intercultural Resources, Delhi
54. Jiten Yumnam, Indigenous Perspectives, Imphal, Manipur
55. A.C. Zonunmawia, Centre for Environment Protection (CEP), Aizawl
56. Balachandran Ramachandran, USA
57. Sudarshan Rodrigues, Independent Researcher
58. Lalit Surjan, Editor, *Daily Deshbandhu*, Raipur

- CC:**
1. A. Raja, Minister, Ministry of Environment and Forests
 2. Namo Narain Meena, Minister of State, Ministry of Environment and Forests
 3. Pradipto Ghosh, Secretary, Ministry of Environment and Forests
 4. Secretaries, State Department of Environment
 5. Chairpersons, State Pollution Control Board

Seven countries to follow best practices in healthcare waste management

The Global Environment Facility kicked off its project titled 'Demonstrating and promoting best techniques and practices for reducing healthcare waste to avoid environmental releases of dioxins and mercury' with an inception workshop at IIC in Delhi on May 27, 2005. The workshop was organised with twin goals in mind: to enable the participants to understand the project and their respective roles, and to help members of the Global Project Team enhance their understanding of the current state of healthcare waste management and receive inputs from the national project stakeholders.

At the workshop, participants received training on methods of raising awareness about healthcare waste management. It also provided a forum for the exchange of ideas, opinions and practical experiences.

The project aims to demonstrate best techniques and practices for minimising healthcare waste and reducing or eliminating releases of dioxins and mercury. These techniques will be demonstrated and promoted, replicated and sustained in seven countries in the world's five development regions. These seven countries are Argentina, Senegal, Latvia, Vietnam, Philippines, India and Lebanon.

Apart from demonstrating practices that can avoid waste incineration by means such

as recycling, waste segregation and using products that generate less toxics and lower volumes of wastes, the project will also demonstrate alternative processes, techniques and practices that achieve the same usefulness as incineration but avoid the formation of dioxins and release of dioxin and mercury. Implementation of the Stockholm Convention will be furthered through activities that use alternative approaches.

Another aim is to develop very specific healthcare waste management models by working with at least one large hospital and several smaller clinics or rural health or injection programmes in each participating country. The focus will be on education, training and establishing management systems, as well as the careful selection of instruments, products and technologies that can be applied in a wide variety of settings.

Staff at the participating facilities will be encouraged to develop and implement best practices. They would be asked to review existing waste management practices and policies for purchase and product utilisation, establish waste minimisation and waste management objectives, propose and adopt modifications in current practices and policies, train managers and staff members, monitor and review progress, and provide ongoing support.

The project will also review national policies, laws and regulations regarding hospital waste management with the aim of formulating proposals for reform.

Finally, the project will also establish national and regional programmes to train and certify experts who can then replicate the programme at other healthcare facilities.

Ratna Singh

MCD undermining Delhi's environment

On April 27 this year, the Commissioner of the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD), Rakesh Mehta, let his guard down. Responding to the issue of waste minimisation and segregation at source at a panel discussion titled 'Delhi's waste future: Landfills in the sky' at the India International Centre, New Delhi, he claimed that "waste is a sign of progress".

Instead of concentrating efforts towards Zero Waste, he outlined his plans to build another landfill at the Bhatti Mines which fall under a reserved forest area.

Given this attitude of its top executive, it is not surprising then that the MCD has recently entered into an agreement with Infrastructure Leasing & Financial Services Limited (IL&FSL) on March 15, 2005, to set up a Refuse Derived Fuel (RDF) incineration plant to generate electricity.

Even the Master Plan for Delhi, which has been drafted by consultants hired by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), encourages incineration as a viable method to deal with the city's waste. UNEP has been central to the Stockholm Convention and discourages the use of incineration the world over. But the MCD, it seems, is a world of its own where civil society groups are unwelcome.

Dr S.K. Khanna, Former Advisor, Planning Commission on Agriculture, and several environmental and labour groups are surprised at the lack of consultation with any relevant civil society group from India in the preparation of the Master Plan Report for the MCD.

The MCD has many more surprises in store for Delhi's citizens. It plans to revive the defunct waste incinerator at Timarpur for yet another waste-to-energy plant. According to the plan, garbage will be compressed into pellets to be sold as RDF to industry, which in Timarpur, will be incinerated to produce electricity.

What the proposal chooses to ignore is that the incineration of this fuel will end up releasing deadly pollutants in the air and violate international protocols and national laws. In fact, MCD's own feasibility study and master plan for optimal waste treatment

Outcomes of the project

- ▲ Detailed data on baseline practices and techniques and on estimated release of dioxins and mercury of all participating health centres will be gathered, enabling the best estimation of cost-effectiveness and efficacy of the project activities.
- ▲ Development and implementation of project waste management policies and objectives within all healthcare facilities by establishing waste management and minimisation objectives.
- ▲ Replicability of the project through regular and effective communication of monitoring and review results.
- ▲ National and regional training and education efforts will advance implementation of the Stockholm Convention.



and disposal for the entire state of Delhi, developed in March 2004, equates burning RDF with waste incineration.

The MCD has used a feasibility report of a Danish firm, COWI, to revive the project. But the report states: "The costs of RDF are often high for societies with low calorific value because energy is used to dry the waste before it becomes feasible to burn it. RDF is often an option when emission standards are lax."

Pelletising garbage would mean that it cannot be segregated as this would lower the calorific value of the fuel. It was, in fact, the low calorific value of Indian waste that was the reason for the closure of the Refuse Incineration cum Power Generation Station at Timarpur after trials in 1990.

The million dollar question is, "If the waste was unsuitable for burning then, how did it become suitable now?"

A similar pelletisation plant with a furnace at Gandhamguda village, Peerancheri Panchayat in Rangareddy district near Hyderabad, has been shut down due to the damage it was causing to the community's health. While the plant was in operation, local doctors started detecting cases of skin rashes, asthma, respiratory problems and some cases of stillborns – problems that were not found before.

D. Shakuntala, the Sarpanch of Peerancheri Panchayat, declares: "Everyone in Peerancheri Gram Panchayat and

its adjoining regions is now contaminated with harmful pollutants which are manifested in the form of increased incidences of brain fever, vomiting, jaundice, asthma, miscarriages and infertility."

Meanwhile the Delhi Campaign for Safe Environment (DCSE), a collection of environmental groups, has severely criticised MCD's approach to the waste problem. Chintan, an environmental group and a member of DCSE, has underlined how the RDF plant would affect the waste picker community and has planned a campaign which includes a demonstration by waste pickers against the MCD.

The Centre for Education and Communication (CEC) plans to ensure that the trade unions and workers of MCD are made aware of the hazards of this technology.

Hazards Centre has stressed the need to work with the community. PRASAR and Toxics Link have taken up the task of working with communities in Timarpur to launch a campaign against the RDF plant.

The Centre for Environment Education (CEE) intends to take up the task of engaging with the International Solid Waste Association and seek its support for the campaign. CEE would also take up the matter with Kirit Parikh, Member, Planning Commission, who is on the Board of CEE.

Earth Care Foundation feels that waste cannot be talked about in isolation, since it is related to other issues of sanitation, and

Waste-to-energy: Technology under fire

THE SUPREME COURT had asked the Central Government (Ministry of Non-conventional Energy Sources) on May 6, 2005, to form a committee to look into the issue of waste-to-energy in Lucknow and Hyderabad. The first meeting of this committee took place on June 3, 2005. The members of this committee include:

- ▲ D.K. Biswas, former Chairperson, Central Pollution Control Board, (Chair of the Committee)
- ▲ Dr Girish Sant, Prayas Urja Group
- ▲ S.K. Joshi, Director, Union Ministry of Environment and Forests
- ▲ Dr M. Rajamani, Joint Secretary, Union Ministry of Urban Development
- ▲ Prof Surendar Kumar, Department of Chemical Engineering, Indian Institute of Technology, Roorkee
- ▲ Prof Shyam R. Asolekar, Centre for Environmental Science and Engineering (CESE), Indian Institute of Technology, Bombay
- ▲ D.K. Mittal, Chief Executive (Special Infrastructure Projects), Infrastructure Leasing & Financial Services Limited
- ▲ A.B. Akolkar, Central Pollution Control Board
- ▲ Dr Suneel Pandey, TERI, New Delhi
- ▲ Dr A.K. Dhussa, Director, Ministry of Non-conventional Energy Sources

stressed the need for involvement of school children and householders.

Vatavaran, a Delhi-based environmental group, expressed support for DCSE in opposing the proposed plant.

Will sense prevail over MCD or will economic interests override the voice of reason? Will it opt for shortcuts or will it follow the wisdom of the Municipal Solid Waste Rules of 2000 which make segregation of waste mandatory? We will follow this issue closely and keep you informed of developments as this story plays itself out.

Gopal Krishna

CHEMICALS AND HEALTH

National Chemicals Management Profile under preparation

It is now widely recognised that chemicals need to be managed properly in order to achieve a sustainable level of agricultural and industrial development and a high level of environmental and human health protection. As an important initial step in strengthening systems in the country for risk reduction and management of chemicals, the Central Pollution Control Board, in association with the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR), is preparing a National Profile to assess the infrastructure for management of chemicals. This will help identify the gaps for capacity building and priority areas of concern to improve chemicals management.

The assessment will cover legal, institutional, administrative and technical aspects of chemical management.

The preparation of the profile requires the involvement of all concerned parties. With this intention, a National Coordination Committee has also been constituted to oversee the preparation of the profile. Toxics Link is a member of this committee.

As far as feasible, participants need to use a harmonised format for the profile, for which purpose UNITAR and the Inter-Organization Programme for the Sound Management of Chemicals (IOMC) have prepared a guidance document that provides a 12-chapter structure. Three working groups (legal, technical and infrastructure) will accomplish the following:

- ▲ Evaluation of available laboratory infrastructure in India.
- ▲ Evaluation of facilities for technical training and education related to chemical management.
- ▲ Assessment of information availability, access to data and their use for decision-making.

The profile will lead to prudent management of chemicals to achieve sustainable economic development and high levels of environmental and health protection.

Papiya Sarkar

CLEAN INDUSTRY

Manual on e-waste being compiled



The Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) is preparing a draft manual on assessing electronic waste in India in collaboration with the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB), GTZ, a German agency (for technical cooperation), and EMPA, a Swiss laboratory (for material testing and research).

The manual will provide a standardised approach and methodology for assessment of e-waste in major cities. It will build a centralised database that will consist of records of waste from electronic and electrical equipment (WEEE).

This follows a national level study sponsored by the Ministry in collaboration with GTZ and EMPA in January 2005, the preliminary estimates of which show that India produces 1,46,000 tonnes of e-waste annually. The top 10 States in the order of their contribution to WEEE are Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Delhi, Karnataka, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Punjab. The highest e-waste producing cities are Mumbai, Delhi, Bangalore, Chennai, Kolkata, Ahmedabad, Hyderabad, Pune, Surat and Nagpur. Bangalore alone generates 30,000 obsolete computers every year that ultimately end up as e-waste.

The biggest source of e-waste in India is through imports. The existence of international as well as local trade networks and mushrooming of importers of old computers in far-flung areas like Darjeeling and Kochi indicate huge imports of obsolete technology.

Kishore Wankhade

Importers and Customs on slippery ground over waste oil

The ongoing hazardous waste case came up for hearing on July 18, 2005, in the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court Monitoring Committee (SCMC) appointed to oversee the final order dated October 14, 2003, regarding the hazardous waste case had filed its fifth quarterly report in March 2005.

In the earlier hearing on May 9, 2005, the Committee had informed the Court that the waste oil contained in 133 containers had not been destroyed as per the directions given by the Court on January 5, 2005. This was because the importers had failed to pay for the cost of incineration even though they had been directed by the Court to deposit the money within four weeks. The Court had taken the issue of non-payment very seriously and had also said that the destruction of the waste oil could not be delayed any further due to the approaching monsoons. The court directed the immediate destruction of the waste oil under the supervision of the SCMC. The cost of the incineration was to be paid by the Customs Department.

The Court had granted one final opportunity to the importers to deposit the cost of incineration with the SCMC within a period of two weeks, failing which they would remain present in Court on July 18, 2005, and show cause why action for contempt not be taken against them.

The process of incineration for the 133 containers has now begun, with six importers having deposited the money towards incineration, while some importers have asked for time to deposit the cost. Two importers have been served contempt notice as they have neither deposited the cost of incineration nor responded to the notices. Interestingly, some importers wanted to re-export the waste oil at their cost but the court has refused to budge and has insisted on incineration of the waste oil.

The empty containers would be handed over by the Monitoring Committee to the Customs Department, which would retain them and will not release them to any party until further orders.

The Jawaharlal Nehru Port Trust (JNPT), the Mumbai Port Trust and the Commissioner of the Customs Department

had also been at the receiving end of the Supreme Court's ire during the May 9 hearing as they had not furnished the requisite information on an additional 170 containers to the SCMC, which was to be done within four weeks of the January 5 order. They have now filed an affidavit where the number of containers has gone up from 170 to 209. The disclosure of more oil means that there is still unaccounted hazardous waste stock lying in the ports in India. The Court had ordered the confiscation of these containers and asked the Commissioner of Customs, JNPT Customs House, to reply why no action has been initiated on this.

Kishore Wankhade

TOXICS FREE HEALTHCARE

Shillong workshop focusses on waste management in the North East

A two-day regional workshop on bio-medical and solid waste management was held in Shillong on April 19-20, 2005. The workshop was co-organised by North East Educational and Development Society (NEEDS) and Toxics Link, in collaboration with the Directorate of Health Services, Government of Meghalaya, and Voluntary Health Association of Meghalaya.

The workshop was aimed at generating awareness among the various stakeholders and building capacity of some partners to take the issue of waste management forward in the region.

During the two days of the workshop, various aspects of waste management were discussed threadbare in an effort to get local institutes to start their own waste management systems. However, the participants cited the lack of infrastructure as a major obstacle. The Deputy Chief Minister of Meghalaya, R.G. Lyngdoh, who was the Chief Guest, cited the example of a centralised facility that was commissioned in 2003, but remained inoperational.

Case studies of hospitals in Delhi were presented and the methods adopted by them were discussed to demonstrate how waste management is handled in different places. The national bio-medical and solid waste management rules were also discussed.

Ratna Singh

Maldives healthcare professionals pick up waste management tips in Bangalore

A healthcare waste management workshop titled 'Consultation with friends from Maldives' was organised in Bangalore from May 20-28, 2005, to help Maldives build a country-wide system of healthcare waste management. The organisers included the World Health Organization (WHO), the Health Care Waste Management (HCWM) Cell, and the Department of Community Medicine at M.S. Ramaiah Medical College, Bangalore.

The workshop was attended by healthcare professionals from various hospitals of Maldives. It covered various issues such as waste classification, waste surveys, viable options in low resource settings, problem areas, etc.

During the course of the workshop, the participants also visited the Common Treatment Facility, Dobbaspeth, the M.S. Ramaiah Medical College and Hospital, a Primary Health Centre, a Command Hospital and a dental clinic.

The delegation of healthcare professionals from the Maldives with workshop coordinators outside the M.S. Ramaiah Medical College and Hospital in Bangalore.



During the workshop, Toxics Link made a presentation on 'Mercury in the healthcare sector' which the participants said was very helpful in raising their awareness about the hazards of mercury.

At the end of the workshop, the participants presented an Action Plan which included phasing out mercury-containing equipment, following safe handling and disposal methods and creating awareness about mercury among healthcare staff.

Priti Mahesh

COMMUNITIES AND WASTE

Reaching out to schools and educational institutes

Solid waste management initiatives

Drawing inspiration from its successful solid waste management drives in two colonies of Delhi, Toxics Link is now turning to Delhi schools to foster solid waste management initiatives among children.

Toxics Link's effort in reaching out to schools began with participation in various school eco-club meets where resource materials on numerous facets of environmental issues were made available to the students.

Toxics Link has built a bridge with Kids for Tiger, which actively campaigns for saving nature and the tiger. Through a workshop organised by Kids for Tiger and Shri Ram School at Vasant Vihar, Toxics Link took the opportunity to interact with eco-club faculty of various schools.

Toxics Link also gave a presentation on 'Mercury and its harm' in educational institutions which generated a lot of interest. At the same time, it also approached the Department of Environment, Government of Delhi, for identifying active eco-club schools for implementing a zero waste system and conducting mercury awareness programmes.

Dr B.C. Sabata, who is the Senior Scientific Officer in Department of Environment, encouraged everybody and extended his support in the initiative. The outreach activity has now begun in two schools in Delhi.

Mercury

Concerned by the use of mercury in schools, Toxics Link has initiated a mercury education and reduction programme in some schools of Delhi.

The programme's objective is to create awareness about the hazards of mercury and to promote proper management and handling of mercury. The ultimate aim is to help schools adopt safety measures and handling guidelines and, where possible, phase out mercury-containing products.

During the past several years, a number of accidental releases have been documented in schools across the region. Children are exposed to elemental mercury in laborato-

ries where mercury is used to demonstrate the concept of density, and mercuric salts are used in various other experiments. It is also found in art rooms, maintenance areas and medical rooms.

Mercury causes serious health disorders. Lowered intelligence, impaired hearing and poor coordination are only some of the effects of elevated mercury levels.

The programme will not only educate children and staff about handling and management of hazardous substances, but will also encourage schools to opt for alternatives to mercury and other hazardous materials present in the facilities.

Linthoi and Yamini Sharma

Toxics Link takes another Delhi colony towards Zero Waste

Following in the footsteps of the successful solid waste management programme at Sarita Vihar's 'D' Block, Toxics Link's Communities and Waste programme received a boost with another colony in Delhi aiming to become a Zero Waste colony. The Resident's Welfare Association (RWA) of Defence Colony's A Block approached Toxics Link to initiate a solid waste management programme under the Delhi Government's Bhagidari scheme.

The Zero Waste project was kicked off on June 2, 2005, by MCD's Central Zone Deputy Commissioner C.B. Kumar. He assured the NGO and local residents that they would get full cooperation from the municipal authorities. "We are happy to be part of the scheme and we will do our best for a better environment," said RWA project coordinator Shammi Talwar. "We will also provide full support to Toxics Link in carrying out the project."

Awareness programmes have since been initiated to sensitise the residents of the 250 households of the block. Meetings have been planned with the RWA, waste collectors and MCD staff to build their capacity. Training workshops have been conducted for waste collectors, and composting has been initiated with regular monitoring by Toxics Link.

Another implementation programme has been initiated at a lower income community in Gautampuri in partnership with

Arpana Trust, a local NGO. Training programmes are to be undertaken to build the capacity of Arpana's staff, the local groups and the waste collectors. A baseline survey has already been conducted. At present, the waste collectors conduct door-to-door waste collection and Toxics Link imparts training on segregation and composting.

Mohammad Tariq

CHENNAI

Keeping an eye on industry

Empowered by the Supreme Court order of October 2003, which mandates that "selected local residents should be appointed as wardens for environmental surveillance, particularly to take note of illegal dumping of hazardous wastes", the Supreme Court Monitoring Committee (SCMC) on Hazardous Waste has appointed Local Area Environment Committees (LAECs) in regions where the pollution from hazardous waste is of significant concern. LAECs have been appointed for Bhopal (Madhya Pradesh), Eloor (Kerala), Kodaikanal, Cuddalore and Manali (Tamil Nadu), among other areas.

The LAECs have a very clear mandate – to act as the eyes and ears of the SCMC, report violations and interface with the community, workers and industry to regulate environmental pollution in general and hazardous waste in particular, in a specific region. The committee has also been bestowed with the powers to recommend closure of any non-complying polluting industry.



Local Area Environment Committee – Manali, Chennai (Tamil Nadu)

Manali is situated along the sea coast in North Chennai; an area that is home to several industries involved in petroleum refining, petrochemical manufacture and related heavy chemicals, most of which belong to the 'red' category (highly polluting) of industries. Several other medium and small industries are also located in the area.

The SCMC constituted an LAEC for the area in early 2005.

By frequently visiting the area (day and night) and by conducting a range of consultations with the local community and its representatives, the LAEC has been able to successfully monitor pollution incidents such as odours and gas leaks, illegal effluent discharge, excessive air pollution due to flares, and open dumping of hazardous waste and sludge. The LAEC recently recommended the closure of two units that were functioning without proper consent and employing crude and polluting techniques. The committee is now organising one-on-one meetings with the industries in the area to systematically address the pollution concerns raised by the local community.

For more information on the LAECs, visit www.scmc.info/pages/laec.htm

Rajesh Rangarajan

Members of LAEC – Manali, Chennai

- ▲ T.K. Ramkumar – Lawyer and Advisor, Exnora International, Chennai
- ▲ G. Swaminthan – Scientist, Central Leather Research Institute (CLRI), Chennai
- ▲ Veena Ravichandran – Scientist, Committee on Science and Technology in Developing Countries (COSTED), Chennai
- ▲ Ramalingam – representative of local community, Manali
- ▲ Rajesh Rangarajan – Toxics Link, Chennai
- ▲ V.N. Rayudu – Tamil Nadu Pollution Control Board (TNPCB)

Symposium on strengthening Poison Information Centres

A symposium-cum-workshop on strengthening of Poison Information Centres in India was held on April 20-21, 2005, at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS). The symposium was organised by the National Poisons Information Centre, Department of Pharmacology, AIIMS, and was sponsored by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. The workshop was attended by doctors, and government and WHO officials.



Participants acknowledged that the four existing centres were overburdened with providing information and help to poisoned patients. Apart from strengthening the infrastructure at the existing centres, it was felt that two additional centres were required in the country. It was suggested that AIIMS could become the main resource centre with the latest technology for analysis, an antidote bank and current information regarding poisons.

Six zonal centres were also proposed to be set up by 2010. These would cater to district centres in the country.

Paying a deadly price

Papiya Sarkar from Toxics Link attended the symposium and made a presentation titled 'Safe disposal of industrial chemicals'. Here is a synopsis of her presentation:

Industrial activities generate considerable quantities of waste. A sizeable quantity of this waste is hazardous. In rapidly industrialising countries such as India the burgeoning contribution of chemical waste into the waste stream generated from industries is most significant. The brunt of untreated industrial waste disposal is borne by communities residing around industrial clusters. In India, since industrial units are spread all over the country, the adverse impacts are felt region-wide. The major pollution caus-

ing industries in India are pesticides, dyes and intermediates, paints, pulp and paper, fertilisers, drugs and pharmaceuticals, inorganic chemical industry, petroleum, electroplating/heavy metal industry and semi-conductors/PCBs.

The problems associated with industrial chemical pollution are far more severe in states like Gujarat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh, which have undergone relatively greater industrial expansion as compared to other states. The problem is compounded by the fact that there are a number of toxic waste producing units which operate in the unorganised informal sector. The cumulative impact of unsafe disposal by these unmonitored units is a cause of serious concern.

After the Bhopal gas tragedy in 1984, a need was felt for hazardous waste management. The Hazardous Waste Management Rules came into existence in 1989 and amendments were made to them in 2000 and 2002.

The implementation of the Rules has remained extremely lax. Civil society groups have been playing a critical role assessing impacts on the community and acting to leverage implementation of the rules. However, safe disposal of industrial chemicals still remains a major challenge in the context of India's industrial growth scenario.

Papiya Sarkar

DELHI HOSPITALS, HOTELS TO USE ONLY BIODEGRADABLE PLASTIC

Frustrated at not being able to implement the Delhi Plastic Bag Act, 2000, in its totality, the Delhi Government has amended the Delhi Plastic Bag (Manufacture, Sale and Usage) and Non-Biodegradable Garbage (Control) Act, 2000, and has made it mandatory for hospitals and the hospitality industry to use biodegradable plastic. The notification is applicable to all hotels, hospitals and nursing homes. Restaurants with a seating capacity of less than 100 persons will not be under the preview of the new law. According to the notification, issued in mid-June, only plastic that decomposes in three months can be used in these two sectors. This stipulation has been made taking into account the fact that plastic used in hospitals and hotels is mainly for one-time use. Biodegradable plastic can be purchased from 25 notified companies in Delhi and its satellite towns.

Yamini Sharma

Maharashtra introduces environment as part of school curriculum

The Maharashtra State Secondary and Higher Secondary Board, in partnership with the Delhi-based Centre for Environment Education (CEE), is finalising books on environmental education as part of the curriculum. Sanskriti Menon of CEE said that the subject is being made activity-based so that students can connect the knowledge to their lives.

The welcome move is the result of a Supreme Court order, issued in response to a writ petition in 1991, which made the subject of environmental studies a compulsory part of the curriculum of all education boards across the country.

Linthoi

A river pretends to run through it

Gopal Krishna looks at the plight of the Yamuna in the backdrop of the Toxics Link Public Lecture on the river, held at the India International Centre in New Delhi on June 22, 2005

If one stands on the Wazirabad barrage and looks north, towards Sonapat, one can see a clean Yamuna just at the entrance of Delhi. At Sur Ghat (few kilometres downstream), the river changes to a sickly white, grey and black, accompanied by an unbearable stench due to discharges from the Najafgarh drain. The Yamuna leaves Delhi as a gigantic sewer, laden with the city's biological and chemical wastes. Its 22-km nightmare ends at the Okhla Barrage where it pretends to be a river though it resembles a huge drain, often frothing with toxic foam which prompts pedestrians and scooterists to stop and look at the spectacle of a dead river. That is the tragedy of this once mighty river.

Over Rs 800 crore have been spent so far on cleaning the Yamuna, but the difference is not even perceptible. Is there hope for the Yamuna yet? Is the Yamuna Action Plan (YAP) doomed to be just talk? It was with these thoughts in mind that I attended the Public Lecture at India International Centre.

The panel consisted of Sureshwar

Sinha, Chairman, Paani Morcha; Ajay Raghav, Deputy Director, National River Conservation Directorate (NRCD), Ministry of Environment and Forests; Sharad Gaur, Centre for Environment Education; and Siddhanth Aney, Programme Coordinator, We for Yamuna.

Mr Raghav of NRCD compared the investment in Yamuna cleaning with the Rhine project of Germany and underlined that the government was not spending enough. One could only imagine what the plight of the Yamuna would be after Phase II of YAP.

As Mr Gaur of CEE said, when 14 million people pollute the river in Delhi, it is too much to expect one agency like NRCD to keep it clean. There is an element of truth in that but why has the NRCD created a framework where heavily polluting industries pollute the Yamuna?

Also the Yamuna's problem is Delhi's drainage system. In the case of the Rhine, the drainage system was rectified first. The NRCD seemingly presents an incorrect picture when it says that "the bigger issue is domestic sewage" unlike London where industrial effluents are the major threat. Nonetheless the fact remains that without the Sewage Treatment Plants (STPs) the domestic sewage cannot be treated in the interest of the river. The new proposal of the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) for the YAP to have a small STP for every colony, to treat sewage water before letting it flow out to the Yamuna, seems useful because it can treat the sewage at

source. But one needs to take the MCD's proposal with a pinch of salt, given its poor track record.

The numbers involved in cleaning the river are mind-boggling. In its 22-km passage through Delhi, the Yamuna acquires over 80 per cent of the total pollution load of over 1,300 km. It receives 1,900 million litres of sewage per day, against an installed wastewater treatment capacity of 1,270 million litres per day. Thus, 630 million litres per day of untreated and a significant amount of partially treated sewage enter the river from 22 drains.

The number of agencies involved are also part of the problem. The Delhi Government, NRCD, MCD, the Delhi Development Authority (DDA), the Delhi Small Scale Industries Development Corporation, the Central Pollution Control Board and the Delhi Pollution Control Committee are caretakers of the river. Having so many agencies is a recipe for disaster as the buck keeps circulating endlessly. The first phase of the ambitious YAP that started in 1993 ended without any success. The second phase of YAP was launched in 2004. It would be far better if one agency was given the responsibility of implementing the plans and meeting deadlines and ensuring the effective functioning of the Common Effluent Treatment Plants (CETPs) and STPs.

Delhi has drawn up plans to use the flood plains for stadiums, roads, museums and parks, unmindful of its linkage with groundwater. The DDA plans to channelise the river, since the stay order of the Supreme Court in 1981 has now been vacated.

The panel discussion offered many suggestions to rectify the problem. Mr Aney suggested that the introduction of an environmental curriculum in schools could bring about a change in the way people treat the Yamuna and other water sources. He felt that involving colleges, residential colonies and engaging with the slums could create awareness about the Clean Yamuna campaign. Sureshwar Sinha called for biological treatment of water. The need for the community's engagement with the river seemed, however, lost sight of.

The communities of Delhi and Agra continue to consume a cocktail of toxic residues on a daily basis. And this, in all likelihood, will continue for a long time.

Gopal Krishna



Hazard Centre, New Delhi

Hazard Centre, a unit of Sanchal Foundation, has been set-up as a support group to provide technical assistance to community and mass organisations for “anything that is dangerous to the survival of the community”. It has a core team of experienced researchers, supported by the multi-disciplinary skills of over 60 professionals from different fields on a voluntary basis.

Over the last six years, the Centre has provided consultancy services to hundreds of small groups and organisations in Delhi as well as other towns and rural areas. The issues have ranged from shelter and services, top industrial hazards and health and safety, technical support to understand the impacts of developmental projects on environment to watershed planning and industrial revival. The Centre specialises in training leaders and activists from the community in researching their problems and finding appropriate solutions.

Hazard Centre is one of the recipients of this year’s Environmental Small Grant awarded by the Environmental Equity and Justice Partnership (EEJP). The year’s activity proposed by the Centre is aimed at ‘Promoting people’s participation in environmental appraisals’. It will support the growing awareness of vulnerable communities about the detrimental effects of projects in their neighbourhood on environment, livelihood,

and health; encourage them to document the environmental impacts; and bring these research findings into the public arena for consideration by policy makers, other stakeholders, and regulatory agencies. An important component of this project is writing detailed critiques of EIA reports, making them understood by the project impacted vulnerable communities.

It is expected that the impact studies and critiques conducted by such groups would help the concerned authorities to develop preventive measures and to strengthen people’s campaigns for sustainable development. This will encourage public participation and increase environmental awareness among the concerned agencies to protect fragile ecosystems, cultures, and traditions of ethnic groups.

The Centre also has an extensive documentation library on urban and industrial within their office premises located in New Delhi.

For more details, please contact:

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Staff of Hazards Centre at the release of the book ‘Blueprint of an apartheid city’ by Shanta Mataji (in the middle).

POSTER ON SEGREGATION

The Bio-medical Waste (Management and Handling) Rules, 1998, prescribe segregation of waste at source for better waste management. The poster on segregation is intended to be a ready reference and a guide for healthcare workers. It details the different colour codes for waste and lists the kind of waste for each category.

To obtain a copy, please contact:

ratna@toxicslink.org



IPEP SOUTH ASIA WEBSITE

The International POPs Elimination Project (IPEP) has launched a website for the South Asia region. The website is hosted by Toxics Link, which has been designated as the IPEP Regional Hub for South Asia.

The website is an important tool in sharing information and coordinating activities and initiatives under the project. It aims to generate awareness on Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs) and foster partnerships among NGOs from the South Asia region to jointly combat the menace.

Besides general information regarding the project, the site also lists all regional partner organisations and outlines the projects that are under way. It also provides regular updates on activities undertaken by various partners.

The site also has a useful resources section. You can visit the site at ipep.toxicslink.org

FACT FILE

A problem of plenty

Light weight, low-cost and water resistance are some of the features that make plastic carry bags among the most ubiquitous consumer items on earth. Generally termed as 'polythene', these bags are produced and used in enormous quantities, at great environmental cost. The environmental effect lasts through the plastic bags' entire life cycle.



Manufacture

▼ Plastic bags start as crude oil, natural gas or other petrochemical derivatives, which are transformed into chains of hydrogen and carbon molecules known as polymers or polymer resins.

▼ The amount of petroleum used to make one plastic bag would drive a car about 115 metres. This implies that fuel consumed in driving a car over 1 km is equivalent to producing 8.7 bags.

▼ According to a study, factories around the world produced 4-5 trillion plastic bags in 2002. These ranged from large trash bags through thick shopping bags to flimsy grocery *pannis*.

▼ Of the total plastic bags used in wealthy nations, a quarter of them are produced in Asia.

Use

▼ The average urban household is estimated to have 40 plastic bags stuffed in cupboards or drawers.

▼ An average individual is estimated to use 130 plastic bags per year.

Disposal

▼ According to Planet Ark, an international environmental group, it is estimated that 100,000 whales, seals, turtles and other marine life die each year after swallowing plastic bags.

▼ The Lucknow *Times of India* reported that 100 local cows were dying daily as a result of ingesting discarded plastic bags.

▼ Bangladesh banned plastic bags in 2002, after identifying them as the prime cause of the 1988 and 1998 floods.

Compiled by Ruchita Khurana



E-toxic listserve

Toxics Link coordinates an electronic discussion group for sharing and disseminating information. If you would like to join the group, please e-mail us at tdelhi@toxicslink.org

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*Toxics Link is an initiative of the
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Quotes from the Earth

Quotes from the Earth is a compilation of films on the themes of Hunger, Water and Survival. To screen the films in your city, please get in touch with Ruchita Khurana at ruchita@toxicslink.org. The films are available against a nominal security deposit. You can view details about the films at www.toxicslink.org/earthquotes/