

EF.DEL/41/07
22 May 2007

ENGLISH
Original: RUSSIAN

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OF THE OSCE ECONOMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL FORUM**

Prague, 21 May 2007

**Environmental problems and security in Belarus:
environmental policy priorities**

I should like first of all to stress the importance for the Republic of Belarus of the ENVSEC project “Environment and Security — Transforming risks into co-operation”. It has made it possible for attention to be focused more clearly on the main environmental problems, which have an impact not only domestically but also at the international level. Proposals have been made on the basis of an analysis of the situation for joint projects by several countries that could realistically address environmental problems. By pooling their efforts to resolve the individual environmental problems regardless of their political aspirations, neighbouring countries will confirm the viability of and prospects for the ENVSEC project.

Belarus is not a large country. It and other countries face domestic threats to environmental security because of the risk of man-made accidents, the inadequate development of an environmentally sound waste-disposal industry and the existence of vast radioactively contaminated areas; but there are also external threats to environmental security through global changes in the environment associated with climate change, transborder transport of pollutants and the presence close to Belarus of hazardous facilities.

Today, Belarus is taking new measures to adapt its environmental policy and has adopted a new approach based in particular on:

- Clearer definition of the basis for determining priorities and adopting economically expedient environmental protection measures;
- Continuous updating of the legal framework, refining economic instruments and improving the effectiveness of planned measures;
- Involving representatives of the various economic sectors in the drafting of strategic plans and programmes;
- Shift in the focus of environmental policy from the identification and rectification of problems to their prevention.

An environmental forecast up to the year 2020 has been elaborated with a view to preventing problems from emerging. In elaborating this forecast, consideration was given to the influence on changes in the country's natural resources not only of anthropogenic but also of natural factors.

In accordance with the National Strategy for Sustainable Development up to 2020, the future development of the country must be based not on prioritizing economic growth as in the past, but on a balance between economic, social and environmental interests.

One of the most important priorities concerns land degradation in its various forms, which is caused by both natural and man-made factors. Around 4.0 million hectares of land (19 per cent of the country) have been eroded or are in danger of erosion, and 3.4 million hectares of land resources (16.5 per cent of the country), including around 1 million hectares of marshland, have been drained. Moreover, 38 per cent of agricultural land is susceptible to wind erosion on account of improper use.

One particular problem is soil and ground pollution in cities and alongside highways, areas affected by waste from military facilities and former military bases.

In the last few decades, the natural landscape of Belarus has been subject to significant economic influence. More than 40 per cent of the marshlands have been transformed into agricultural land. In the process of "melioration" (land reclamation), almost 60 per cent of the small rivers in the country have been redirected. The "melioration" activities have had a particularly strong impact on the natural landscapes in Polesye in the south of Belarus.

A unique natural region situated in the floodlands of the Pripyat, a major navigable river, and occupying an area of more than 6 million hectares or almost 30 per cent of the country is being fragmented and undergoing changes in structure and function. There has been an increase in the frequency of extreme climatic events, in particular droughts and frosts. Ways are currently being considered for using peat bogs and "melioration" systems to ensure the environmentally sound management of natural resources.

The physical and geographical area of Polesye includes parts of Belarus, Russia, Ukraine and Poland. The region fulfils a biospheric function on a European and global scale. It suffers from a wide range of problems that can be solved only by way of international co-operation.

We would propose the project "Preserving the biodiversity and ecosystems in the Polesye region" as a means of joint implementation. Belarus is generally interested in the further development of its system of specially protected natural areas as a bridge between the European environmental network (Natura 2000) and the Russian one. There is a need now for an inventory and certification of the various regions to assess their environmental sustainability, the designation of new protected natural areas in marshlands, and the reflooding of degraded peat bogs. The implementation of projects of this type would be of benefit to many countries.

Of equal importance in the Polesye region is another project connected with the river Pripyat. The land around the river is flooded in spring for 41 to 60 days on average, the extent

of the flooding varying from 1.5 or 2 to 15 km. In some years the flooding is particularly intensive and causes vast amounts of damage. Flooding of this type has occurred six times in Belarus in the last 50 years. The summer floods in 1994, for example, caused damage of around 100 million US dollars.

In view of the transborder nature of the river, the resolution of the flooding problem calls for co-operation with Ukraine, where the river drains in part. Implementation of the project "Joint monitoring and management of the drainage and flooding in the Pripjat basin" could make an important contribution to strengthening international relations.

Among the priorities set by Belarus are ensuring the sustainability of water ecosystems, preventing their pollution and depletion and introducing new management methods based on the river basin principle in other regions as well. This will also call for an exchange of information with Lithuania on the catchment basin of lake Drisvyaty/Druksiai as components of a transborder system for managing the water resources of the Daugava/Zapadnaya Dvina basin.

Another domestic problem faced by Belarus is the elimination of obsolete pesticides. The seepage of pesticides buried close to the borders could present a risk for other countries. Stockpiles are kept in all parts of the country in stores of varying quality and levels of security and in seven underground stores. At present, more than 2,000 tons of pesticide have been repacked in accordance with European Union standards for secure and consolidated storage until they are destroyed. This task was carried out as part of a State-financed programme and an aid project by the Government of Denmark. We hope that the work can be continued with the assistance of the NATO "Science for Peace and Security" programme. This would represent another step towards the solution of the problem of eliminating hazardous pesticides.

Belarus is a unique geographical crossroads of major trans-European rail, road and air routes. Oil and gas reach Western Europe via pipelines passing through Belarus. The recent accident in the Urecha-Ventspils supply pipeline shows how important it is to ensure the safe operation of gas and oil pipelines. As a result of the accident, around 120 tons of diesel fuel were spilled into the environment. On 26 March the oil film reached the Latvian border. The measures taken to clean up the area around the pipeline breach and the Ula and Zapadnaya Dvina rivers have reduced the risk of environmental damage. A complete clean-up, however, will cost millions of dollars. We would also point out that this is not the first accident involving the pipeline.

The special project "Safeguarding the environmental safety of oil and gas pipelines in Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine" is therefore of vital importance. It could include an exchange of information on pipeline management, the establishment of a pipeline monitoring system and special brigades with simplified border-crossing arrangements to assist in dealing with accidents. The project could be financed by oil and gas companies.

The ENVSEC review contained a detailed and objective analysis of the problems connected with accident at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant and its aftermath. These problems do not affect a single country but the entire region. As they concern a fifth of the country's territory, they also remain a priority for Belarus. It will still take several generations to solve them and progress can be achieved only through the concerted efforts of many

countries. There have been too many words spoken about the Chernobyl accident while the critical importance of the problem has been overlooked.

The caesium-137 content in the soil has diminished by approximately one quarter as a result of the natural decay of the radionuclides. Contamination from strontium-90 is localized. According to forecasts by experts, however, while the general level of radioactive contamination is going down, it will become more intense in areas where plutonium isotopes are concentrated because of their natural decay and the formation of americium-241.

The National Action Plan for the Rational use of Natural Resources and Environmental Protection for 2006 to 2010 calls for the provision of reliable information about the state of the soil and ground in Belarus through the extensive use of remote methods, ecogeochemical mapping, monitoring and the establishment of a methodological and analytical basis for timely and effective management decisions.

In conclusion, I should like express my gratitude to the initiators and sponsors of the ENVSEC project "Environment and Security — Transforming risks into co-operation". The project work has been interesting and useful, and the document that has emerged through the creative exchange of opinions and assessments will make it possible to take effective and concerted measures to reduce environmental risks not only in Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine but also in neighbouring countries.