PRESS BRIEFING ON CLIMATE CHANGE
AND AGRICULTURAL VULNERABILITY

VIENNA, 21 November (UN Information Service) - A press briefing on the topic of Climate Change and Agricultural Vulnerability was held in the Vienna International Centre on Thursday 21 November. It was organized by UNIS Vienna in conjunction with the Austrian-based International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA). The briefing was attended by approximately twenty-five journalists, NGOs and representatives from the missions.

The Senior Scientist on land use change at IIASA, Dr. Mahendra Shah, presented the report on Climate Change and Agricultural Vulnerability, commissioned by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs for the World Summit on Sustainable Development at the briefing. Dr. Shah said that developed countries have the means to cope with extreme events and long-term climate change. However developing countries with limited resources are grappling today with widespread poverty, hunger and ill health and these same developing countries will be confronted by the additional problems of climate change and population growth in the future. The issue of adapting to climate change must be considered by the international community urgently, Dr Shah said because it will take decades of research to develop agricultural crops, livestock and fish varieties that can adapt to the changing climate conditions and the pests and diseases that will go with such environmental changes.

Dr. Shah explained how IIASA has prepared a global assessment of the impact of climate change which shows that it is the poor and food-insecure countries which will bear the brunt of the negative impact of climate change. The research presented by Dr. Shah showed that the 40 of the least developed countries which will account for one third of the world’s population by 2080, would lose a fifth of their potential cereal food production by the same time. So developing countries will face a growing dependence on cereal imports.

The IIASA report also highlights the issue of equity and fairness as the developing countries have contributed little to the causes of global warming but will be harder hit by the consequences of it.

Dr. Helmut Hojesky, the Director for climate change and air quality at the Austrian Federal Ministry for Agriculture, Forestry, Environment and Water Management spoke about the Austrian strategy on climate change and how it would impact on agriculture. Firstly he pointed out that this is a minor issue in Austria compared to the impact on developing countries as shown by Dr. Shah’s presentation. Nonetheless climate change will have an impact on Austria and the first signs are already there to see. Dr. Hojesky said that the specialist insurance companies had raised the issue, because of a rise in the number of insurance claims following the floods, hail storms and other extreme weather conditions this year. The hail storms alone destroyed 100,000 hectares of arable land production and 50 million Euro has been paid out by insurance companies this summer in Austria. He said that more droughts, erosion and mudslides could be expected in future in Austria as extreme weather conditions become more frequent.

The Media Coordinator for the Conference on Climate Change, Dr. Axel Wuestenhagen briefed journalists on the developments of the recent Eight Session of the Conference of the Parties to the Climate Change Convention (COP 8) held in New Delhi, India. According to the press reports the Delhi conference was a lost opportunity and Dr. Wustenhagen quoted a report from the Times of India which described the final declaration as ‘much debated but meaningless’. However he said that there had been some important achievements at the conference. One of the biggest accomplishments was
making the Kyoto Protocol’s Clean Development mechanism fully operational. This will channel private-sector investment into emissions-reduction projects in development countries and the first projects are likely to be approved early next year. The conference also agreed on an international system for national data on greenhouse gas emissions which will mean they are comparable and credible.

Dr. Wuestenhagen told the briefing that the Kyoto Protocol needed to be ratified by 55 countries including developed countries representing at least 55 per cent of that group’s 1990 carbon dioxide emissions and could happen by Spring 2003, after it is ratified by the Russian Federation.

On the process of the negotiations, Dr. Wuestenhagen said that there were different interest groups – both among the member states and civil society groups. Small island states for example had a special interest in climate change and its impact on their very existence while the OPEC countries have different but specific views and concerns too. On the civil society side there were the environmental NGOs on the one hand and the business community on the other.

Questioned about whether they were optimistic that measures will be taken to reduce the impact of climate change, Dr. Shah said that one of the problems now was that there was not a level playing field. The developed countries had analysed the impact of climate change on their economies but the developing countries were not so well informed. He also said that climate change would have the greatest impact on food-insecure countries. Dr. Hojesky agreed that climate change will have an impact but there is the possibility to lower negative trends and we need to change the way we use resources in the world and see it in terms of sustainable development. Dr. Wuestenhagen was both optimistic and pessimistic. The human race will realise that their own survival is at stake and will be forced to act he said and he was confident we would act in the right way. However turning around the rate of greenhouse gas emissions was like turning around a large ocean liner and would take time. He was pessimistic because there have been many appeals to help the hungry of the world and yet there are still hungry people. He agreed that those who suffer the most are the poorest of the world and said that it was important to capture the interests of business. He gave an example of how fridge manufacturers realised they needed to make fridges which did not contain CFCs and how insurance companies are supporters of efforts to reduce the impact of climate change because of the impact on their business.

In response to a question about the number of people who will be affected by hunger because of climate change, Dr. Shah said that it could result in an additional 175,000 million undernourished people in the world, according to one of the models developed by IIASA.

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