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Special Session of the General Assembly to Review and Appraise
the Implementation of Agenda 21

United Nations Panel on Forests to Hold Final Session from 11 to 21 February Will Countries Create a Binding International Accord on Forests?

New York, 7 February 1997 -- Nations will decide whether or not to pursue a formal, legally-binding world convention on forests during the final session of the Intergovernmental Panel on Forests (IPF), which will hold its fourth and final meeting at United Nations Headquarters in New York from 11 to 21 February 1997.

The meeting is expected to be the culmination of an intense international debate opened five years ago during the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (Earth Summit) held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992.

The question of protecting forests under a binding Convention has challenged nations like few other environmental issues and dominated much of the 1992 Earth Summit, where countries ultimately adopted a set of non-legally-binding "Forest Principles". The debate among Governments intensified post-Rio, in tandem with growing public concern about ongoing deforestation and forest degradation. In 1995, nations created an Intergovernmental Panel on Forests (IPF), under the auspices of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development. At the IPF's third meeting (Geneva, September 1996), nations tabled a diverse range of options for consideration, including:

- Start Convention negotiations immediately;
- Continue debate on elements of a Convention in a forum like the IPF;
- Improve coordination and implementation of existing legal instruments;
- Create a voluntary code of conduct for forest owners, industry and investors.



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Conclusions from the IPF meeting will be presented at the fifth annual session of the Commission on Sustainable Development (New York, 7-25 April 1997), and later to the Special Session of the UN General Assembly (New York, 23-27 June 1997), being convened to conduct a full review of progress towards sustainable development since the Earth Summit.

Convention Issues

An international convention on forests is sometimes referred to as "the missing Rio convention" or the "fourth convention", the three others being the Framework Convention on Climate Change, the Convention on Biological Diversity, and the Convention to Combat Desertification.

Until the Earth Summit in 1992, many tropical countries were against a convention on forests, which they felt would only further limit their potential for development using their natural resources. They also believed that the debate had focused entirely on tropical forests. The Forest Principles adopted at Rio therefore emphasized national sovereignty over natural resources and made explicit reference to all types of forests.

In the five years since the Earth Summit, the debate over the world's forest resources has become much more balanced, as it is now widely recognized that all countries and all types of forests have an important role to play. Many tropical countries now feel that their case has been made and that threats of tropical timber boycotts and import bans have become more realistic in view of the international dialogue, including "northern non-governmental organizations (NGOs)" in the IPF. A growing number of countries feel that the time is now ripe to begin work on a convention.

Background



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Public concern about forests has resulted in boycotts of timber from certain countries and demands for certification of sustainable timber. Critics often cited the state of world forests as an example of the lack of progress since the 1992 Earth Summit.

After Rio, public pressure resulted in intense activity by many countries either individually or jointly with others. Processes were initiated that focused specifically on forests within national sustainable development strategies. Other processes focused on the development of criteria and indicators for what is a sustainably managed forest, either regionally or among countries with similar types of forests. The establishment of the Panel is a reflection of the need felt by Governments to join in a common effort at the international level to ensure sustainable management of forests.

Forests play a vital part in the world's life-supporting ecosystems and are the crossroads for other issues that lie behind negotiations in the Panel.

Some facts:

- Forests help to mitigate climate change.
- The planting of trees is often the solution for halting land degradation and desertification.
- Deforestation threatens the lifestyles of indigenous peoples whose traditional knowledge could contribute to sustainable forest management.
- Wood is a major source of energy for most of the world's people, particularly in developing countries.
- Important watersheds are usually forested areas.
- Forest products are important sources of income and employment for many countries.
- Wood is the third most valuable natural resource in the world marketplace.
- Non-wood forest products such as game, berries, mushrooms and medicinal plants as well as services such



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as management of watersheds have an increasing importance as a source of income.

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In view of the many benefits that can be reaped from a sustainably managed forest and the innate sustainability of trees as a renewable resource, forests present a very attractive solution for a multitude of problems. Governments and civil society have taken a variety of actions, including the following:

- China has begun a campaign to create a "great green wall" of forest;
- The Amazonian countries have reached an agreement on criteria and indicators for the sustainable management of the Amazonian forest;
- The rehabilitation of mangroves through tree planting is saving coastal areas in the Philippines;
- Afforestation (tree-planting in previously unforested areas) in Peru is protecting the restoration of ancient indigenous terrace works and irrigations systems in the Andes;
- The Plant a Tree Project, the Franciscan response to Agenda 21, has resulted in 68,700 trees growing in 53 countries. Much of this activity has been geared towards the preservation of native species, soil conservation and poverty alleviation.
- The Maldives initiated a programme in 1996 to plant a million trees over three years to protect its environment, particularly its beaches. In September 1996, 500,000 trees were planted.
- To protect the rainforest in Costa Rica, a project initiated in 1986 is promoting the use of bamboo instead of wood as a building material. To date, 200 hectares have been cultivated with bamboo and 700 houses have been built.

Despite these examples of constructive action, there are ample reasons to avoid complacency in addressing forest issues.



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According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), deforestation between 1980 and 1995 amounted to 200 million hectares, compensated by only 20 million hectares of forest plantations initiated during that time.

Deforestation is likely to be with us for some time, especially with the world needing to feed a population of some 7 billion by 2010. FAO has estimated that some 85 million hectares of forests need to be cleared for agriculture alone by that year.

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