

Conference in Belgrade clears the way to environmental security and sustainable future

The Sixths Ministerial Conference «Environment for Europe» held in the Serbian capital of Belgrade on 10-12 October, gathered delegations from 56 countries and representatives of the European Commission.

Environment for Europe (EfE) is a forum for tackling environmental challenges and promoting broad cooperation for sustainable development contributing to poverty eradication, improving quality of life and creating a safer world by means of clear-cut policies. The EfE initiative is based on environmental cooperation among countries in Europe, North America, Caucasus and Central Asia in conditions of the changing political and socio-economic landscape. EfE involves governments, civil society and private sector in achieving the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDG).

The First EfE Conference was held in 1991 in Czechoslovakia to define basic guidelines for ecological and health-related strategies in Central and Eastern Europe. The Second, Third and Fourth Conferences were held in Switzerland, Bulgaria and Denmark respectively. The Fifth Conference held in 2003 in Kiev, Ukraine adopted the Environment Strategy for Countries of Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia.

«Tajikistan suffers from the lack of coherence in regional environmental policies and coordination among the governments within Central Asia, - says Mouazamma Burkhanova, leader of a Tajik NGO «Support to Civil Initiatives». - In Tajikistan, the government pays more attention to cotton - traditional strategic raw material - frequently forgetting about the growing environmental challenges».

Burkhanova considers that the Tajik delegation can benefit from the educational segment of the Sixth Conference. Tajikistan participates in the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. Since 2003, the country also has been implementing a specific educational program for local communities supported by several international donor agencies. So far, the program has been relatively successful. However, experts say that the lack of local decision-making and insufficient decentralization of power in provinces and districts are thwarting the program. According to the Tajik Constitution, the President personally appoints leaders on all levels (even heads of district administrations).

European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) has recently allocated funds for a municipal waste management program in Dushanbe, which is expected to be replicated in other cities of Tajikistan. «In order to create incentives for proper waste management, our NGO together with the municipal authorities in the capital try to attract entrepreneurs, - says Burkhanova. - Commercial waste management and secondary production are fast-growing and very perspective businesses in developed countries. We try to apply this experience in our conditions».

«Very often, funds allocated by numerous donor agencies and international monetary institutions in Tajikistan's infrastructure and communal facilities are misspent, - says another member of the Tajik delegation who wished to remain anonymous. - Public at large hardly knows about the volumes of foreign allocations and facts of embezzlement, whereas the mayor's office and the central government are reluctant to share this information with public organizations and the media». A special agency in charge of statistics on external aid (Aid Coordination Unit under the President) was dissolved at the end of 2006, and now, it is difficult to find reliable data on the foreign assistance and programs under implementation.

Another source told the EurasiaNet correspondent that numerous project implementation units (PIU) existing in the ministries very often fail to keep their commitments on grant and loan projects. Eventually, Tajikistan keeps borrowing money from foreign banks, but the public does not know much about the allocated funds and the final outputs of these programs.

The recent report by the UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) says that «more than 100 million people across the pan-European region do not have access to safe drinking water and adequate sanitation; air pollution, ground-level ozone, and nitrogen oxides shorten average life expectancy and affect healthy development of people; biodiversity declines and the loss of ecosystem continues...».

The situation in Central Asia is much worse compared to Europe. Despite some progress achieved due to sustained efforts, many environmental problems remain unsolved. Since the late 1990-s, Tajikistan has been suffering from frequent outbreaks of typhoid and malaria - the ailments, which were completely eradicated in the Soviet time. Despite dozens of millions of dollars allocated for rehabilitation of water supply systems in big cities and small settlements, the quality of drinking water remains extremely poor. Two thirds of the Tajik capital is fed by the water from Varzob river, and during seasonal floods, the water comes to consumers absolutely unpurified and even contaminated.

There are several derelict uranium tailings in Sughd province, the Kanibadam pesticide dumpsite (northern Tajikistan), and a nuclear burial ground in Faizabad district (central Tajikistan). Very little is known about these infrastructural objects inherited from the Soviet era and located in disaster prone areas in vicinity to ground waters and open reservoirs. It is expected that these problems will be discussed at a special forthcoming conference in Dushanbe scheduled for early November 2007 and supported by International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

Three countries of Central Asia - Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan - have been implementing a program «Environment and Security» (ENVSEC) launched in 2002 in densely populated and fertile Ferghana valley (total population is about 9 million). The budget of this program supported by UN agencies and OSCE is \$3,1 million.

Mahmadsharif Khakdodov, National Coordinator of ENVSEC Program in Tajikistan says that during the period of 2005-2007 the ENVSEC initiative has covered a number of activities, such as assessment of risks from toxic and radioactive dumping grounds in transboundary areas, public awareness campaigns in communities, and development of information networks. «The next phase of the initiative is focused on the climate change problems among which are the negative impact of droughts on agriculture and human health, excessive seasonal precipitation, melting of glaciers, soil erosion and desertification», says Khakdodov.

The Final Declaration adopted at the Belgrade Conference says that «there is a need to improve the management of chemicals in countries of the region and to take care of old waste legacies». Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management (SAICM) is targeted towards the reduction of environmental pollution from heavy metals and other hazardous chemicals.

Experts stressed at the Belgrade Conference that «the speed of progress varies across policy areas and the implementation of the designed programs remains the main problem». UNECE region is not making sufficient progress with access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation by 2015, as well as to a significant reduction of the rate of loss of biodiversity by 2010. Ecologists emphasise that the water supply and sanitation, integrated water resource and transboundary watercourse management should be priority areas for action. Protection of water sources and water quality are crucial for human health and sustainable development.

In this regard, Tajikistan is trying to convince its neighbors of the necessity to create a Central Asian Water Consortium. This idea has been repeatedly voiced at various international summits by the Tajik leader Emonali Rakhmon. So far, this idea has found support only from Kyrgyzstan (also an upstream country), whereas Uzbekistan stands aloof from Tajikistan's appeals. (See EurasiaNet Archive).

«Breaking the link between economic growth and its environmental impacts is one of the key challenges facing economies in South Eastern Europe (SEE), Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia (EECCA)», says a new report «Sustainable Consumption and Production in South East Europe and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia», released on 11 October in Belgrade. The report was jointly prepared by the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) and the European Environment Agency (EEA), and launched at the Sixth Ministerial Conference. The report provides detailed analysis in selected economic sectors: industry, food, building, transport and waste disposal.

At the Belgrade Conference, the Ministers evaluated 36 national ESD reports performed by the countries with the help of a specific set of indicators. Another milestone of the Strategy implementation was the collection of the Good practices in ESD in the UNECE region jointly published by UNECE and UNESCO. A number of examples in formal, non formal and informal education were collected from governments, NGOs and business communities in North America, Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia.

The implementation of the Belgrade Conference recommendations should be adapted to specific challenges of each country and common interest identified by subregions. Ministers agreed that securing funds for national implementation should be one of the priority tasks for governments.

«Global environmental problems affect increasing number of people. The relation between environmental problems on global and regional levels and international stability, peace and security is quite obvious», - says the Final Declaration adopted at the Conference.

Konstantin Parshin is a freelance journalist based in Dushanbe.

Konstantin Parshin, NANSMIT

Источник: