

Dateline Johannesburg...

Joy of text, wrangle over fine prints



PHOTO: AFP

Short-lived? The welcoming ceremony on the eve of the opening of the World Summit on Sustainable Development

AFP, Johannesburg

Their goals may be lofty or shameless. They seek to defend the Earth's dwindling resources and haul its very poorest out of a life of want. Or they simply want to defend entrenched national interests.

Their battleground is the Earth Summit in Johannesburg. Here, negotiators from 190 countries and from myriad entities and organisations are crawling over every inch of a draft blueprint for the future of our home.

In this verbal form of tribal war, the weapons are brackets, bold print, fudgy paragraphs, brain-numbing adjectives and vacuous adverbs. Lurking in reserve are platoons of weaselly semicolons and sneaky commas.

Seventy-one pages long, the draft Plan of Implementation contains 153 resolutions on pretty much everything that ails this planet.

It ranges from lack of water, sewerage and electricity for poor people to climate change, hazardous chemicals, farming subsidies, renewable energy, child labour, encouraging participation by women and saving threatened species.

But no one would place this document on the same inspirational level as the Gettysburg Address, Churchill's Battle of Britain speech or the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Indeed, most people would probably consider the Plan unreadable. Its worthy goals are couched in language so bureaucratic and laced with so many sub-clauses that, by comparison, a life insurance policy is a thrilling read of clearcut promises.

For a soundbite, try paragraph 8(a), in which the parties agree to:

"Improve access to reliable, affordable, economically viable, socially acceptable and environmentally sound energy services and resources, taking into account national specificities and circumstances, through various means, such as enhanced rural electrification and decentralised energy systems, increased use of renewables, cleaner liquid and gaseous fuels and enhanced energy efficiency, by including through capacity-building, financial and technological assistance and innovative financing mechanisms, including at the micro and meso levels, recognising the specific factors for providing access to the poor."

And you may also care to note that dear old 8(a) is one of the lucky paragraphs in the plan -- it's been agreed.

Wherever dollars, national pride or economic interests are at stake, the pages are littered with brackets and bold print, denoting discord.

And, to cap all that, none of the action plan is binding. So what's the point? Why go to all the trouble?

Yves Cochet, a French Greens MP and former environment minister, agrees that the text is not a big seller for the general public, but hopes that a "political declaration" by heads of state and government on September 4 will be sexier.

"It's true, the plan has many loopholes and abstract, technocratic phrases which weaken rather than strengthen commitments," he told AFP.

"But it's important because it is 'agreed language', the terms on which future, legally-binding treaties will be based. And it has value as a political commitment and as a lever. Activists will be able to go to their governments and say, 'You agreed to such-and-such in Johannesburg.'"

Tony Lavina, senior fellow at the World Resources Institute (WRI), agrees.

"It's a negotiated document, so it's written in a language intended for bureaucrats and organisations for their work over the next 10 years."

As for its value, "it all depends on what is finally going to be agreed. If some hard targets are there, it will have a good impact on people's lives."

US under fire from friends, foes over Kyoto Protocol

The United States came under fire from friends and critics alike at the Earth Summit Wednesday for ditching the Kyoto Protocol, with US corporate giants, including two oil companies, joining Greenpeace to demand the climate treaty be ratified.

AFP, Johannesburg

Delegates were stunned to see the environmental group join forces with a corporate lobby, the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD), whose ranks include firms that have been vilified by green activists.

Just hours earlier, Japan appealed to the United States, its ally, to become a Kyoto ratifier.

Greenpeace International political director Remi Parmentier stood side-by-side with BCSD President Bjorn Stigson, and both men read separate paragraphs from a joint statement, appealing to government leaders meeting in Johannesburg next week to combat the global warming threat.

Without naming the United States or President George W. Bush, they declared uncertainty about Kyoto's future was creating "a political environment which is not good for business, and indeed it's not good for humanity."

"Despite our well-known differences, we have found ourselves frustrated by a lack of political will and decisiveness of the governments to fulfill their commitments under the (1992) Rio (Earth Summit) agreements," they said.

They added: "Given the seriousness of the risk of climate change and the need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, we are shelving our differences on other issues on this occasion, and we call on governments to be responsible and to build the international framework to tackle climate change on the basis of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and its Kyoto Protocol."

"... We are also calling on governments to put their own differences aside and to cooperate more fully to make the goals of greenhouse gas emission reductions a reality."

Earlier, Japanese Environment Minister Hiroshi Ohki said that the protocol, agreed in the Japanese city of Kyoto in 1997, was the cornerstone of efforts to curb greenhouse-gas pollution blamed for climate change.

"Japan calls upon the United States of America, the largest emitter of greenhouse gases, to ratify the Kyoto Protocol," Ohki said at a seminar here.

Japan was a close US ally in the talks to complete Kyoto, and has repeatedly appealed to Washington to back the charter.

The WBCSD has been a powerful voice for business in the arena of sustainable development -- the idea that economic growth and protecting the environment should go hand in hand.

It has clashed with environmentalists many times over such issues as monitoring of corporate activities that affect the environment, and whether environment problems should be tackled by voluntary or regulatory means.

Its rollcall comprises 163 multinational corporations, more than two dozen of them American. US-listed members include ChevronTexaco and Conoco in oil and gas, as well as DuPont (chemicals) and Alcoa (aluminium), and the German-US car behemoth DaimlerChrysler. Others include the British oil giant BP, Japan's Honda and the French tyre firm Michelin.

The Kyoto Protocol requires rich industrialised countries to trim output of carbon-based gases by a deadline of 2008-2012.

Bush abandoned it in March 2001, shortly after taking office. He complained it would be too costly for the US economy and unfair because it did not require big emerging countries such as China and India to make targeted reductions in their own pollution.

The accord will take effect once it has been ratified by at least 55 countries accounting for at least 55 percent of carbon dioxide pollution as of 1990 levels.

Ratification by Russia, the last major industrial signatory, is vital, but experts at the Earth Summit in Johannesburg say this is unlikely to happen before 2003.

The United States accounts by itself for around a quarter of global emissions of greenhouse gases, much of it generated by cars.

ENVIRONMENT WATCH

Haze havoc in Borneo

AFP, Jakarta

MORE people sought treatment for breathing problems, residents donned smog masks and flights stayed grounded in an Indonesian town which remained blanketed by choking haze on yesterday, officials said.

Visibility in Palangkaraya, the capital of Central Kalimantan province on Borneo island, was around 100 metres, the local meteorology office said.

Hidayat, an official with the office, said winds were minimal and there was no hope of rain to help clear the sky of the smoke haze from forest and ground fires.

Most motorcycle riders in the town and some pedestrians wore masks, which were distributed free by Red Cross workers and students.

Palangkaraya has been the hardest hit by haze in recent weeks. Widespread rain cleared the sky over the neighbouring province of West Kalimantan earlier this week.

Arnold Singarimbun, who heads the Sylvanus general hospital in Palangkaraya, said the number of in-patients with breathing problems has risen.

Asthma patients rose from 87 in June to 100 in July and 150 so far this month, he said. Patients with other respiratory problems rose from 83 in June to 87 in July and to 93 this month.

Two children aged under 10 died this week at the hospital but Singarimbun denied press reports that the haze had contributed to their death, saying they were suffering from pneumonia.

Indonesia's annual haze problem is less serious than in 1997/98, when widespread forest and ground fires in Borneo and Sumatra island sent smoke over the region.

But Indonesia is still coming under pressure to act.

Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi is expected to meet Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri next week to discuss the haze problem, according to a report in Malaysia's Star newspaper.

The meeting will be held in Johannesburg on the fringes of the Earth Summit.

Malaysian Environment Minister Law Hieng Ding said they would arrange the meeting together with Singaporean and Brunei counterparts to register concern over the haze.

A threat of jail issued by Central Kalimantan governor Asmawi Agani apparently failed to deter people from setting fire to clear land for replanting, Hidayat said.

"We have fields burning even at the southern rim of the town," he said. The government has banned land clearing by fire since 1999 but prosecutions are very rare.

Merpati Nusantara Airline had no flights operating to or from Palangkaraya because of the low visibility, an employee said.

Indonesia's Kompas daily, quoting local farmers, said some 8,000 chickens had died around Palangkaraya. It quoted the owners as speculating the haze was behind the deaths.

A humble, hardy tree

AFP, Johannesburg

A humble, hardy tree called the jatropha may hold the key to providing Africa with cheaper, cleaner energy and pulling millions of rural poor out of the poverty trap.

That is the vision of southern African green activists, who are promoting innovative projects at the Earth Summit here to use the tree's oil-bearing seeds for fuel to power trucks and light homes.

"Biofuel has a great future, but only so long as governments legislate to encourage its use," said Jarrod Cronje of Africa Eco Foundation, a South African non-governmental organization promoting its initiative at the Earth Summit in Johannesburg.

Finding a renewable alternative to conventional diesel is an idea that dates back to the 1930s. Oleaginous crops such as rapeseed, also known as colza, are a favoured source in the northern hemisphere.

But in the harsher, drier conditions of Africa, a more resilient source is needed.

The best candidate is Jatropha curcus, a tree that was introduced into Africa several hundred years ago, so there is none of the ecological risk

which comes from introducing a new species, and which is already being successfully grown and harvested as a biofuel in Nicaragua.

The jatropha, also called the physic nut, grows quickly and needs little water or nurturing, reaching maturity after two years, and yielding small black seeds that are covered in light, white husks and which can be picked by hand.

It grows to about the size of an apple tree, which means that harvesting does not require tall ladders.

The seeds are then crushed to extract raw oil, a process that also provides organic fertiliser from the husks.

A simple and cheap chemical, caustic soda, is added, which separates the oil into liquid soap, which is siphoned off, and a more refined oil.

That substance is then heat-treated with methanol, which in turn yields a glycerol sediment, which is a cosmetic ingredient, and also diesel, which can be used like its fossil-fuel counterpart in trucks, buses and generators.

"Jatropha biodiesel is a little bit cleaner than conventional diesel. There are no sulphur emissions," said Cronje. It still produces carbon dioxide, the greenhouse gas that drives global warming, but by growing trees, which soak up CO₂, the environmental damage would be far less than from conventional fuel.

Africa Eco Foundation calculates that jatrophas and another oilseed tree called the maringa could be commercially viable on plantations of 1,000 hectares (2,400 acres), which would have a cheap tunnel-shaped greenhouse made from plastic film to grow seedlings.

A family of four to six people could prosper if it had a 25-hectare (75-acre) section, earning a net profit of between 2,000 and 4,000 rand (200 to 400 dollars, euros) a month, which is several times the typical income in rural South Africa. Families could also supplement their income from honey, placing beehives near the trees.

To get the ball rolling, Africa Eco Foundation is pitching for funds from the World Bank and local authorities.

In Zimbabwe, meanwhile, a group called Environment Africa is selling jatropha soap and has discovered that the raw oil can be burned in a specially-adapted lamp, which is a boon for people living in remote villages where there is no electricity.

"It's like using paraffin," said Environment Africa's executive director, Charlene Hewat.

Interest in biofuels surged after the 1970s oil shocks, but fell back when the oil price fell.

Today, though, many countries around the world have passed laws requiring diesel to contain a minimum percentage of biofuels. The best record is held by the Czech Republic, which insists on 100-per cent biofuel content.

A small jatropha biofuel project has been launched in Mali, in west Africa, with German help, but none exists so far in the south of the continent.

Australia brushes aside Tuvalu's legal threat

AFP, Sydney

The Australian government yesterday dismissed the threat of legal action from a tiny island nation, which says Canberra's failure to curb greenhouse gases is causing it to sink into the Pacific.

Delegates from Tuvalu said they had received support from other nations at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg for legal action against Australia and the United States.

Tuvalu, which has a population of about 12,000 people, is slowly sinking because of rising sea levels blamed on global warming.

It has criticised Australia and the United States for failing to ratify the Kyoto Protocol on greenhouse gas emission and first raised the possibility of legal action last May.

Australian Environment Minister David Kemp, who is leading his country's delegation in South Africa, said there were no grounds for the action.

"I can't see any basis at all," he told ABC radio. "Australia contributes about one percent of global greenhouse gases so it is very definitely a global issue and no country is doing more with the Pacific island countries than Australia to put them in a position where they can adapt and assess the risks."