

UNEP tackles ozone depleting substances in Afghanistan

KABUL - As Afghanistan continues to transform itself after years of conflict and with turmoil on the rise in the southern part of the country why would anyone here care about the ozone and ozone depleting substances?

After all today Afghans want to get on with their lives, find decent employment, put a roof over their heads, meals on the table, and safely send their children to school.

In the capital city there are signs of recovery virtually everywhere - sprawling hotels, glitzy shopping centres, new buildings and expensive homes are on the rise.

The post war expansion, however, also has a downside with neighboring countries using Afghanistan as their own dumping ground by selling their unwanted goods. The influx of used cars and second hand home appliances, such as refrigerators and air conditioning units, has left a hidden yet harmful mark on the environment.



Second hand appliances, like these old refrigerators, pose an environmental threat

Virtually unknown to Afghanistan's largely illiterate population are man-made chemicals found in these appliances like chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs), methyl bromide and halons, being emitted in the atmosphere that cause continued damage to the earth's already fragile ozone layer.

"From a scientific perspective ozone depletion is a global phenomenon," says Atul Bagai, a Bangkok-based Regional Network Coordinator with the UN Environment Program (UNEP).

"It is not a country specific phenomenon like air pollution, but this is a global phenomenon where action that has been taken by the global community affects the ozone layer and also action taken by the global community heals the ozone layer, so in that respect Afghanistan is an equal partner as any other country which is leading to more pollution or more depletion of the ozone layer," explains Bagai.

MONTREAL PROTOCOL – THE BEGINNING OF THE END

When production of ozone depleting substances reached a worldwide peak during the late seventies and eighties the earth's citizens were consuming one million metric tones a year of the toxic man-made chemicals.

The repercussions were felt almost immediately.

Increased amounts of harmful ultraviolet (UV) radiation caused many to develop skin

cancer, eye cataracts and suppressed immune systems. Changes to ecosystems and species were noticed. Along the way emissions also had an affect on the food we eat by causing reductions in agricultural productivity.

Enter the 1987 Montreal Protocol, an environmental agreement ratified by developed nations who understood the urgency and gravity of the ozone depletion problem and committed themselves to making swift changes.

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan hailed it as "perhaps the most successful environmental agreement".

Within 10 years most of the ozone depleting substances and environmental problems had been eliminated. The Montreal Protocol was a success story. Now it was up to those same developed countries to help developing nations become a party to the Montreal Protocol.

Because the total elimination of ozone depleting substances from these countries would virtually kill their socio-economic development, developed nations recognized the need in 1991 to establish a Multilateral Fund giving financial and technical assistance to enable developed countries, like Afghanistan, to phase out ozone depleting substances without disrupting their economies.

In June 2004 Afghanistan ratified the Montreal Protocol becoming the 188th party. Presently there are 190 parties.

EARLY SUCCESS FOR AFGHANISTAN

Earlier this month national stakeholders, government officials and international environment experts gathered in Kabul to create awareness for and implement a national phase out plan for ozone depleting substances.

Despite being behind the proverbial eight-ball, having signed the Montreal Protocol in 2004 compared to neighbouring countries Iran and Pakistan which ratified 10 years earlier and have had the time and resources to not only meet their obligations, but phase out their consumption of gases, Afghanistan had already reduced its consumption of CFCs by 50 percent in 2005.

"Under the Protocol the obligations are the same for Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan, so that means if Iran ratified in 1995, by 2005 they had to reduce their consumption by 50 percent. Afghanistan has been able to achieve in the first six to eight months what would have taken some countries two to three years," says Bagai, pleasantly surprised at how quickly this war torn country, rife with security issues, has been able to catch up in a relatively short amount of time.

"The action it has taken on the environment side is something that needs to be outreached, because this is one country where things just happened," he says.



Bagai: Afghanistan has become a successful model

The three-day workshop included the participation of implementing partner GTZ, a German development agency whose responsibilities include providing technical advice on protecting the environment.

Present studies prepared by GTZ in Afghanistan revealed the country currently consumes 180 metric tones of ozone depleting substances, an amount calculated following a country wide data collection exercise that counted the number of refrigeration cylinders found in air conditioning units, ice machines, and refrigerators. Comparing this figure to what a neighbouring country like Iran consumes – nearly 5,000 metric tones - may seem miniscule, but as a late signatory to the Protocol Afghanistan needs to reduce this consumption to zero by the year 201

Despite criticism in other areas leveled at President Karzai's government, experts all agree that this has been one success story that needs to be told - Afghanistan will be able to meet its 2010 obligation.

"Part of the reason for that is the fact the government is new whereas in other established countries ministries have been in competition with one another. Here because it is new it has been easier to have cooperation between ministries," says Dr. Thomas Grammig, a GTZ Project Manager. "Afghanistan has been very quick and it will continue."

\$1.06 MILLION PROVIDED FOR PHASE-OUT PLAN

The Montreal Protocol's Multilateral Fund has provided US \$1.06 million to implement activities that will enable Afghanistan to begin a Phase-Out Plan in order to reach the 2010 zero-tolerance target.



Illegal cylinders containing CFC's

Under the guidance of the UNEP, a National Ozone Unit has been established with the National Environmental Protection Agency (NEPA) and is already paying dividends.

"Last year the government banned the importation of ozone depleting substances-based equipment and this past July the government approved the ozone depletion substance regulations which will force importers to acquire a license making them liable if they import greater amounts of ozone depleting substances. The license will be cross-checked by customs officials which will allow the National Ozone Unit to have a closer look and control on all imports," says Zahid Ullah, a UNEP/NEPA Ozone Officer from Kabul.

In order to meet the demands of developing countries, the Montreal Protocol has a provision allowing developed countries to continue producing a certain percentage of these harmful gases every year as they are phasing out CFC-based equipment.

Furthermore, a three-year training program on good refrigeration practices is due to begin within the next year. Once trained, technicians in eight Afghan cities will be able to replace or retrofit existing units, safely remove hazardous gases, and find suitable places to store waste. Currently the Government of Japan has a pilot project looking at practical ways to deal with CFC's deemed unusable.

SECONDARY BENEFITS

There is also the important issue of unnecessary amounts of energy being used due to Afghanistan's long summers, where temperatures are known to hover around 40° Celsius.

"A good part of electricity consumed on the electricity grid goes to refrigerators and air conditioners. So if you do something that affects the efficiency of these appliances it will impact the load on the electricity grid. So that is a secondary benefit," explains Grammig.

For Afghanistan the major question for ozone depleting substances will be the maintenance of refrigerants found in cars, refrigerators, and air conditioning units. Within the next 12 months technicians will be receiving GTZ-approved equipment allowing them to deal with recovery and recycling issues.

ROBUST BORDER PATROLS NEEDED

If this seems relatively simple consider Afghanistan's porous border, which allows neighbouring countries eager to sneak in their unwanted, CFC-laced, second hand products into the country.



Border patrols: greater vigilance, better detecting equipment needed

"Between 1993 and 1995 there was a big import of used refrigerators from Russia, central Asia, Iran, and Pakistan," says Zahid Ullah of UNEP/NEPA. "Pakistan is still manufacturing CFC-based refrigerators and they have increased their exports to Afghanistan. So the problem now is that we have to phase out these CFC-based products."

"That is going to be the biggest challenge," says Bagai, who sees the need for close collaboration with the ministries of Justice, Finance, Commerce, and Border and Tribal Affairs.

"I will not say that they have been able to successfully achieve what they wanted to because it is such a long, porous border. However authorities are also finding it hard to grapple with the normal trade taking place, but there is good coordination between these countries right now in terms of coordination," continues Bagai.

Khushal Rassi, Customs General Director with the Ministry of Finance, says all his agents can do is check on current licenses. "At the moment customs agents are lacking equipment to be able to identify ozone depleting substances from entering the country," says Rassi through a translator.

HOW BIG IS THE OZONE HOLE?

In terms of size the hole, which shifts every year, is said to be as big as the US continent and because of the various climactic conditions the hole keeps changing. However, recent findings show matters may be improving.

"If the present compliance continues at the global level, then the ozone layer will reach its pre 1970's status in another 50 years," says Bagai.

Most agree that climate change is real and while talk of the ozone and ozone depleting substances may seem odd in this war ravaged country an ounce of cure today will cancel out many of tomorrow's environmental concerns

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