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Colombo, Sri Lanka, 15 October 2001 - Recognizing the need to eliminate any remaining weaknesses in the international regime for protecting the earth's ozone layer, governments will meet here from 16 to 19 October in order to strengthen the effectiveness of the Montreal Protocol on Substances That Deplete the Ozone Layer.

"Despite the enormous cuts in ozone-depleting chemicals achieved under the Montreal Protocol, the stratospheric ozone layer remains in poor health as a result of past emissions," said Klaus Toepfer, Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme, under whose auspices the 1987 Protocol was adopted.

"To minimize the damage to humans and the environment caused by increased ultraviolet (UV-B) radiation reaching the surface, we need to tackle simultaneously all the remaining sources of these chemicals," he said.

While smaller than last year's record thinning, the current spring ozone "hole" over Antarctica measures 24 million square miles - almost the combined size of the Russian Federation and Brazil. Earlier this year, during the Northern Hemisphere spring, the ozone layer over the Canadian Arctic declined by 20% for a short time, while over Northern Siberia the decline exceeded 30% in early March. Declines of 10 to 12% were measured over large areas of densely settled Europe, and declines of 6 to 10% were recorded over North America.

The Colombo meeting will consider accelerating the ozone layer's revival by:

- * Helping governments to comply with the agreed phase-out schedules. With the consumption of CFCs and other ozone-depleting substances in developed countries now almost completely phased out, attention is turning to the developing countries. The ozone layer cannot recover unless these countries - which account for 83% of the remaining global CFC consumption - make an early transition to ozone-friendly chemicals. They are currently committed to a 1999 freeze in their production and consumption of CFCs; in 2002 they will also be required to freeze halons and methyl bromide.

In Colombo, delegates will review the first round of data and reports from developing countries on their compliance with the CFC freeze. These reports show that the vast majority of developing countries are meeting their commitments. For countries having difficulties implementing the CFC freeze, a special meeting will be convened on 17 October for discussions with their Ministers.

Fortunately, developing countries can rely on the Multilateral Fund for support in meeting the Protocol's targets. Delegates will prepare the terms of reference for a study that will help governments determine the level at which the Multilateral Fund

should be replenished for the 2003-2005 funding period. The Fund has disbursed more than \$1.2 billion since 1991 for phase-out projects in some 120 developing countries.

* Discouraging the development and marketing of new ozone-depleting substances. The Montreal Protocol covers 96 specific chemicals, many of which have been added through amendments in recent years. But the global chemicals industry develops thousands of new chemicals every year, some of which then enter the market. The risk is that some of these new substances could prove dangerous to the ozone layer.

Concerns have been raised about such recently introduced chemicals as Hexachlorobutadiene (used as a solvent and produced as a by-product of chlorinated chemical production), n-Propyl Bromide (being aggressively marketed as a solvent, a feedstock and as a carrier and intermediate for pharmaceutical and other industries), 6-bromo-2-methoxyl-naphthalene (used in the manufacture of methyl bromide, which is controlled by the Protocol), and Halon-1202 (used in fire fighting).

Delegates will discuss a long-term strategy for ensuring that new chemicals are tested for their ozone-depleting potential before they enter the market.

* Clamping down on illegal trade in CFCs and other substances. Millions of CFC-dependent refrigerators, automobile air conditioners and other equipment are still in service around the world. Criminals clearly have a strong incentive to smuggle CFCs and other banned substances across borders. Governments are seeking to minimize illegal trade through better monitoring and through arrests and severe penalties. Efforts are also underway to restrict the export and import of used products and equipment that are dependent on CFCs and other ozone-depleting substances as a way of cutting demand for these substances.

Since developing countries are now also subject to phase-out schedules, they too are increasingly exposed to illegal trade. Governments are discussing the need for stronger controls on imports and exports, more training of enforcement officers, improved regional customs cooperation, enhanced regional networking for sharing information and experiences, and greater awareness raising to help buyers avoid accepting illegal substances unknowingly. In Colombo, Governments will consider in what way to conduct a study of the best means of monitoring international trade and preventing illegal trade in ozone-depleting substances.

* Promoting alternatives to ozone-depleting chemicals. The meeting will consider new applications for "essential-use exemptions" for 2002 and beyond; for example, a health exemption is normally granted for CFC metered-dose inhalers for asthmatics. Technological progress offers hope that the need for such exemptions can be reduced.

Related issues on the agenda include reducing emissions from ozone-depleting

chemicals used as process agents (chemical catalysts), developing national management plans for reducing Halons in critical uses (such as fire-fighting) and considering critical-use exemptions for methyl bromide to be implemented beginning 2005.

The issue raised previously by the European Community regarding the tightening of the Protocol's phase-out schedule for developing country consumption of HCFCs - a leading substitute for CFCs - will also be discussed at the meeting. The proposal by the European Community is based on the concern that, while much less destructive to the ozone layer than CFCs, HCFCs do contribute to ozone depletion, and alternatives are now available on the market.

* Accelerating ratifications of the Protocol's amendments. While the Montreal Protocol itself has a membership of 180 states plus the EC, its subsequent Amendments have received fewer ratifications. For example, governments had agreed to ratify the 1999 Beijing Amendment (which phases out Bromochloromethane and introduces new controls on HCFCs) in time for it to enter into force by January 2001, but the Amendment still does not have the 20 ratifications required. Until governments ratify, they are not legally bound to phase out the chemicals agreed in the London, Copenhagen, Montreal and Beijing Amendments.

The 13th Meeting of the Parties to the Montreal Protocol will include a preparatory segment (16-17 October) and a high-level segment (18 - 19 October). Some 400 delegates from about 130 countries are expected to attend.

Under the 1987 Montreal Protocol and its subsequent Amendments, governments have agreed to phase out chemicals that destroy stratospheric ozone, which is essential for shielding humans, plants, and animals from the damaging effects of harmful ultraviolet light. Recent years have seen record thinning of the ozone layer, including an ever-larger ozone "hole" over Antarctica. Scientists predict that the ozone layer will start to recover in the near future and will fully recover some time in the mid-21st century - but only if the Protocol continues to be vigorously enforced. However, they also believe that climate change (which is warming the earth's surface but cooling the stratosphere and thus accelerating the chemical processes that lead to ozone depletion) may contribute to delaying the recovery.

Note to journalists: The meeting will be held at the Bandaranaike Memorial International Conference Hall, Baudhdhaloka Mawatha, Colombo 7, Sri Lanka. For additional information before or after the meeting, please contact Michael Williams at +41-22-917-8242/9244/8196, +41-79-409-1528 (cell phone) or Michael.williams@unep.ch. During the meeting call the conference center at +94-1-69 1130 or +94-1-69 6489 and ask for the UNEP Ozone Press Office. A press accreditation form and other information about the Montreal Protocol is available at www.unep.org/ozone/.

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