

Mission to the Top of the World: Awareness Event Nearest to the Stratosphere

Sagarmatha National Park, Syangboche, Nepal - 25 March 2010: “Implementation of the Montreal Protocol is like climbing the Mt. Everest. We are now just below the summit and climbing the Hillary Step. Phase out of HCFCs represents that Hillary step” said Rajendra Shende, Head of OzonAction, UNEP pointing to the very step near to the summit of the Mount Everest-also called as Sagarmatha by the local community- in front of him.



A press conference and awareness event for the school children held today at 3,800 meter on the plateau of Sagarmatha National Park overlooking the Mount Everest were organized by the Government of Nepal and supported by United Nations Environment Programme. It was the first ever such event on the Ozone Layer protection to be held at the highest level in Himalaya and nearest to Mount Everest. School children and the teachers from Khumjung school established by late

Sir Edmund Hillary, the first one to step on top of the highest mountain with Tenzing Norgay, participated in the event along with six international and national journalists.

Marco Gonzales , Executive Secretary of the Ozone Secretariat, Atul Bagai of the UNEP OzonAction and Dr. S.R Joshi of Ministry of the Industry participated in the event.

Phase out of CFCs and Halons on 1st January 2010 represented a confidence gathering process. “We took baby steps to start with and then by conserving the stamina, climbed up with grit and determination. We are not yet there on the summit. But by phasing out of HCFCs , the last Ozone Depleting Substances we would be able to cross the last hurdle to reach on the top”, said Mr. Shende.

Marco Gonzales explained to the journalists that by phasing out of HCFCs we would also gain important climate advantage as HCFCs are also potent Green House Gases (GHGs). The improvement of energy efficiency of the room air conditioners while replacing HCFCs would also add to the emission reduction of GHGs and ease the power supply situation in Nepal. Thus HCFC phase out provides a ‘quick fix’ to the climate issue which is having severe impact on the Himalayan glaciers and the life of the people in Nepal.

The events were symbolic. The implementation of the Montreal Protocol to start with was considered as formidable challenge next to impossible. However, the implementation started in small way and then gathered the momentum. The success of the Montreal Protocol today is as inspiring as the story of the climb of Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay. While returning back to Kathmandu the thought lingered that if the Everest of the Montreal Protocol can be climbed why not that of climate change?

Note to the editor:

At nearly 9 km above sea level, the summit of Mt Everest pokes nearly into the stratosphere, where the planet’s protective ozone layer is. Ever since 1985 the countries of the world have got together under the Montreal Protocol to phase out ozone-depleting substances. The mountaineers and Sherpa of the world community have struggled hard to protect the ozone Layer. Just as climbing Mt Everest has been made possible with international cooperation, the Montreal Protocol shows us that however challenging it may seem the world can address the global threats to the environment.

The Himalayas have become a true barometer of accelerated climate change due to greenhouse gas emissions. The snowline is receding; the glaciers are in full retreat. Below Mt Everest, a 2 km by 1 km glacial lake has formed on the Imja Valley where there was no lake 30 years ago.

There is an important link between phasing out ozone-depleting substances and cutting back on carbon emission. HCFCs as well as many alternative chemicals that do not deplete the ozone layer are actually very potent greenhouse gases. While solving one problem, we may be exacerbating another.

Taking advantage of the presence of the high level mission of UNEP and UNDP for the discussion with the Government of Nepal on the implementation issues, to draw attention to the remaining global challenge, a press conference was held at Syangboche below Mt Everest on 25 March to highlight the issue of ozone layer depletion and climate change linkages. Students from the Eco Club of Khumjung School, one of the many schools set up by Sir Edmund Hillary participated in the event.

The Montreal Protocol is a model of how scientists have succeeded in generating awareness among the public and policy-makers, and created the public pressure and political will for international action.

The Protocol is recognized as the most successful multilateral environmental agreement to date, having phased out nearly one hundred ODS by 98%. From 1990 to 2010, the Montreal Protocol's control measures on production and consumption of such substances will have reduced greenhouse gas emissions by the equivalent of 135 giga tons of CO₂, making it another important instrumental in the fight against climate change.

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