

At half-time, some progress at biodiversity talks

Halfway through a two-week conference in Germany on biodiversity, enough progress has been made to avoid total failure, but much more remains to be done at the UN event.

More than 6,000 delegates from 200 nations have debated and pored over tonnes of conference papers. After a week, they have isolated key issues splitting the ninth conference of the parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) that runs until May 30.

On Sunday, they were told to forget weekend-break plans and attend extra sessions summoned by the chairman of the mammoth conference, German Environment Minister Sigmar Gabriel. The delegates must find a way to preserve biological diversity on the planet.

Despite minimum progress, decisive action to halt the global destruction of virgin-nature sites like rain forests and to prevent the extinction of flora and fauna has not yet been agreed.

The talks have prompted greater public awareness and concern at the exploitation of natural resources for the profit of the few.

Gabriel says the sheer survival of billions of people may depend on this meeting's resolutions, and adds that most government officials have praised the 'constructive' atmosphere in the debates.

That should move the talks forward, says Gabriel, whose role as chairman has been important in setting the fast pace.

Ahmed Djoghlaif, chief of the UN Convention secretariat, has been unstinting in his praise of the Germans and Gabriel for their no-nonsense management of the negotiations. It is a gargantuan task getting so many nations to agree.

Like the UN climate-change convention, the pact on bio-diversity requires 'consensus' decision-making by the 191 parties under the aegis of the UN.

It takes only one naysayer to torpedo any agreement, so conflicting national interests must be balanced.

There have been critics in Bonn quietly suggesting that such a decision-making method is impossibly unwieldy, but no one openly proposes the alternative: voting and letting a majority decide.

Conference managers shrug and say, 'If we started a debate about making decisions by a majority, we'd never hear the end of it.'

One of the key issues at the conference has been how to achieve access to the natural resources mankind needs, and at the same time compensate poor countries, for example for the use of their unique plant species as sources of drugs.

There has been some progress towards drafting a Bonn 'road map' on future talks about this. Such a road map would lead to a treaty being adopted by the next bio-diversity conference in Nagoya,

Japan in 2010.

Gabriel says both developing and industrialised countries will benefit from having clear ground rules about profit sharing with the poor nations.

On another idea, creating a world network of nature reserves on land and under the sea, antagonisms appear to have become more rigid. Sources in the delegations say there is little prospect of any deal.

Environmental group Greenpeace is annoyed that the industrialised world is not sufficiently willing to foot the bill. Developing nations say they cannot afford to create reserves alone.

As a solution, Gabriel has proposed a 'Life Web', in which poorer nations would offer specific tracts for adoption and rich nations would post the money to convert them to reserves. Some cash offers have already been made in Bonn.

The environmental harm done by bio-fuel plantations has been a point of controversy, as had been expected. Gabriel describes the Bonn meet as the first international conference to debate the emerging problem.

'That in itself is a success and a breakthrough,' he said.

Brazil was the loudest of those who questioned whether the conference had any authority to discuss the topic, arguing that it was not within the ambit of a bio-diversity convention.

In the end, Brazil, which grows ethanol crops, agreed to the debate, but insisted it must not be pilloried as an offender.

Delegates agreed that ecological guidelines should be drafted to demonstrate how bio-energy crops could be grown beneficially.

Environmentalists have homed in on the bio-fuel trade as a target, and demanded the crops be banned.

The critics say the plantations wipe out forests, destroy plants, which are useful in other ways and deny food output to the hungry.

The tempo of the talks is set to pick up this week with the end in sight and well over 100 environment ministers from the different countries set to arrive and head the delegations in the top-level phase from Wednesday until Friday.

Environmentalists are hoping German Chancellor Angela Merkel, a former environment minister herself, will galvanise the talks when she speaks at the Bonn meeting, perhaps with a ringing appeal for action or with a surprise pledge of funds.

Edgar Bauer (© IANS / India eNews)