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Germany Pushes for Stronger UNEP The planet needs a stronger UN agency to protect it, ministers say

European environmental ministers meeting in Berlin this week are calling for a stronger United Nations environmental agency to deal more effectively with increasingly urgent environmental matters.

The UN has to have a stronger program to deal with pressing global environmental issues, according to environmental ministers from Germany, France and Spain, meeting in Berlin this week to discuss a proposal to create a new UN organization for the environment.

"Despite the many environmental problems in the world, only a small UN body has been set up since 1972," the ministers said in an open letter to the Frankfurter Rundschau appearing Friday. "Since then the global environmental problems have increased and, although several treaties on the environment have been drawn up and ratified, there is a massive lag in the introduction of global environmental policies."

What exists today is the United Nations Environment Program, which despite a successful history, suffers under a structural flaw, according to the ministers: It is not an officially recognized United Nations organization and therefore lacks the power and influence of other UN bodies such as the Food and Agriculture Organization or the World Health Organization.

David vs. Goliath

Germany's Klaus Töpfer has led the organization for the past seven years. Created in 1972, it has still managed to be environmental conscience of the world despite being sniggered at. It has done so by plugging away at more than 100 multilateral accords in Nairobi, Kenya with 800 workers, and other bureaus in Europe, Asia and the US.

But it is a "David versus a Goliath," said Jürgen Trittin, Germany's environment minister. Such an organization needs to be strengthened in order to stand eye to eye with such pillars of the global economy as the WTO, the World Bank and the IMF in order to be effective, he added.

Kenyian Nobel Peace Prize winner and environment minister Wangari Maathai agreed.

"It is often said that environmental protection is a luxury for the developed world while we, in the less developed world, need work and economic growth," Maathai said. "But when one is poor and underdeveloped and reliant upon one's own natural resources for support, then environmental protection is not a luxury but a necessity."

German Environment Minister Jürgen Trittin said that for a long time, officials in the developing world believed that environmental protection would inhibit economic development. But these days, that idea is changing with the recognition that such measures don't stand against development but are part of it.

Carefully optimistic

In September, UN General Secretary Kofi Annan in his report to the General Assembly will recommend strengthening the UN's environmental agency by creating the United Nations Environment Organization as a way to promote wider reform within the UN itself. Such an initiative is supported by China, Canada, Mexico and many European and African states.

"We know that most European states agree and now we need to take this up with the security council," said Serge Lepeltier, the French environmental minister. "We can be optimistic if not sure that such a measure will succeed."

But the United States opposes the initiative because it would be funded by compulsory contributions from member states.

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