

UN Environment Agency becomes crunch issue in Rio talks

The UN Environment Programme (UNEP) is emerging as a hot issue in preparations for June's Rio conference, styled as a once-in-a-generation chance to restore a sick planet to good health. The US is fighting a proposal, backed according to France by least 100 countries, for transforming UNEP from a poorly noticed, second-string unit into a planetary super-agency.

Environmentalists have long complained that Nairobi-based UNEP, set up in 1972 as an office of the UN and with a membership of only 58 nations, lacks clout to deal with the globe's worsening ills. These range from climate change, water stress and over-fishing to species loss, deforestation and ozone-layer depletion.

But the environmental mess also coincides with the crisis of capitalism, which greens say is blind to the cost for Nature in its relentless quest for growth. The fateful intertwining of these problems points to a unique chance of a solution at the June 20-22 "Rio+20" conference, they argue.

With possibly scores of leaders in attendance, the 20-year follow-up to the famous Earth Summit has the declared aim of making growth both greener and sustainable. "The new capitalism which emerges from the crisis has to be environmental, or it won't be new," French Ecology Minister Nathalie Kosciusko-Morizet said recently.

The key vehicle would be UNEP, which according to the vaguely-worded French proposal would be changed into the World Environment Organisation. It would become the UN's 16th "specialised" agency alongside the World Health Organisation (WHO), Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) and so on.

To the outsider, this may sound at best like a bit of terminological tinkering -- at worst, just another bureaucracy-breeding machine. Experts, though, say status change could be surprisingly far-reaching. Specialised UN agencies have high degrees of autonomy, enabling them to set agendas, frame international norms, stir up interest in dormant issues and sometimes poke their noses into areas of national sovereignty.

At its most ambitious, a World Environment Organisation would embrace not just the member-states which fund it but also business, green and social groups, becoming a very loud voice indeed. It could intrude into sensitive areas such as trans-border use of water resources, fishery quotas and habitat use -- and even monitor environmental standards for trade in goods and services (AFP 6-2-12).