



**BASEL CONVENTION**  
on the Control of  
Transboundary Movements  
of Hazardous Wastes  
and their Disposal

# BASEL CONVENTION *newsletter*

## Basel Convention Strategic Plan:

# *Off and running!*

### Sachiko Kuwabara-Yamamoto

The Basel Convention now has a Strategic Plan, approved by the Parties at their 6th Conference (COP6) in December 2002.

The adoption of this important blueprint for implementation was a major milestone in the Convention's history, and has given us all a new sense of direction. Our purpose is much clearer, now that we know how the Parties want us to proceed.

The Strategic Plan covers the period up to 2010, and builds on the Basel Declaration on Environmentally Sound Management adopted at COP5 in 1999. This Declaration reflected the evolution of the Convention, which until that time was principally aimed at setting up a framework for controlling the movement of hazardous wastes across international frontiers. The Basel Declaration addresses the environmentally sound management of hazardous and other wastes, emphasizing their prevention and minimization.

The enthusiasm with which the Parties and the Regional Centres are tackling the implementation of their Strategic Plan can be seen in their response to the call for project proposals. We received 34 proposals far surpassing our expectations.

Proposals were received from eight Parties (Belarus, Cambodia, Croatia, Egypt, Ethiopia, Germany, Japan and Jordan) and nine Regional Centres for Training and Technology Transfer (Argentina, China, Egypt, Nigeria, Senegal, Slovak Republic, South Africa, Trinidad and Tobago and Uruguay).

Next, the project proposals will be evaluated by the First Session of the Open-Ended Working Group, to be held 28 April-2 May 2003. The Group will choose those projects which qualify for funding according to the specific criteria established by COP-6, and approve the level of funding.

Ideally, all the projects would be funded, but resources are limited. The funds required by Parties and BCRCs for carrying out all the projects total US\$1,960,951. But the resources available from

the Basel Convention Trust Fund for the year 2003 is US\$400,000 and for 2004 is US\$800,000 for a total of US\$1,200,000. This means the Open-Ended Working Group will have to be selective.

If all goes well, we hope to see projects get under way by the middle of this year. And we should have tangible results to report to COP7 in 2004.

This is an exciting time for the Convention. We are all looking forward to seeing the new Strategic Plan transformed from ideas into reality.

**Sachiko Kuwabara-Yamamoto is the Executive Secretary of the Basel Convention**



*Note: The documents UNEP/CHW/OEWG/1/2 and Add 1 contain a note by the secretariat with a sheet summarizing the proposals that meet the relevant criteria. The full text of the proposals are available in documents UNEP/CHW/OEWG/1/INF.3, Add.1 and Add.2. All the documents are available at the web site of the secretariat (<http://www.basel.int>)*

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## The toxic legacy of E-wastes

Used computers and computer scrap represent one of the most significant segments of the fastest growing waste stream in the world today.

It is now estimated that by 2007, there will be more than 700 million 'obsolete' computers in the USA alone.

European studies indicate that e-waste is increasing by 3 to 5 percent per annum; three times faster than the increase in the general waste stream. Even today, e-waste accounts for about 5 percent of all municipal solid waste:

- More than disposable diapers
- More than all beverage containers
- About the same as all plastic packaging.

Exporting this waste to the developing world, presents the poorest nations with a challenge, which even the richest nations find daunting. If not managed in an environmentally sound manner, e-waste ends up in the landfills of both developed and developing countries. Once in landfills, the wastes break down. Some substances will contaminate the air and poison the atmosphere; others will leach into the soil and quickly poison water basins

E-waste has become a serious environmental and health challenge for two primary reasons: it is potentially hazardous, and it is being generated at alarming rates.

An international meeting was held in March 2003 (sponsored by UNESCO and attended by the Secretariat of the Basel Convention) to discuss efforts to bridge the 'digital divide' between the developed and developing worlds through the export of used computers. A Brazilian delegate said that in the absence of a word for "computer", some of Brazil's indigenous people had coined the phrase, "Ayu Riru Rive", meaning *boxes accommodating language*. Other participants, developing and developed alike, referred to the export of used computers for this purpose as "revolutionary change agents". These people are right, and their efforts are commendable, meeting as they do important social and educational goals.

However, there is a dark side to the glowing picture painted by this not-for-profit

trade, represented by the dumping of used computers by some in the developed world on the developing world. The Brazilian Indians may have designed a different word for these same boxes if they had known what they contain in environmental terms, including plastics, glass and electronic boards with gold, palladium, silver and platinum.

Computer scrap contains:

- Lead
- Chromium
- Mercury
- PVCs
- Flame retardants
- Barium



- Phosphorus
- Beryllium

These substances are hazardous to human health and the environment, and the dismantling and handling of end-of-life computers containing them is very dangerous work involving injuries to the poorest people. For these reasons, waste electrical or electronic assemblies or scrap are listed as hazardous waste A1180 under Annex VIII to the Basel Convention.

### E-waste is being generated at alarming rates

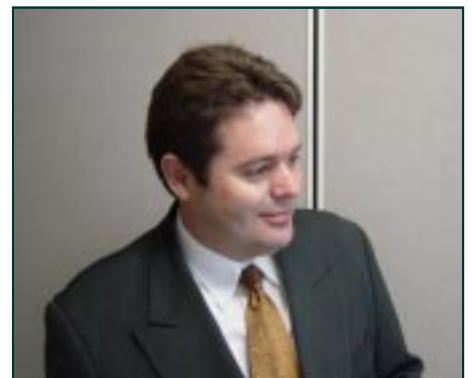
Very strong forces drive obsolescence in computers and other forms of e-waste – technological, economic, and even psychological. Obsolescence can be both real and imagined and result from:

- Rapid technological innovation;
- Market forces, which dictate it is often better to discard and replace than repair and reuse;
- Powerful marketing for 'newer', 'better' products that focus on the individual's need to feel they have the best for themselves, their children and their schools.
- Because of these pressures, the average life span of a computer in the developed world has shrunk dramatically in recent years, from around 5 years to just 2 years.

### The way ahead

Used computers are a major and growing concern for the Basel Convention. Meeting the challenge they pose will require action by governments, industry, consumers, IGOs, NGOs, and the Secretariat of the Basel Convention. Most of all, it will require a new partnership between these stakeholders to develop innovative, proactive and practical responses.

The Parties to the Basel Convention have expressed their view that meeting this challenge is a priority.



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# *A welcome challenge*

**Interview with Dr John Mbogoma, Executive Director of the Basel Convention Regional Centre – South Africa**

## **Where were you born?**

I was born in Tanzania in 1952. My home town is a city near the shores of Lake Victoria called Mwanza. I am the fifth child in a family of twelve, and my father was a teacher and a school inspector.

## **What was your early work experience?**

I spent 18 years working in industry, during which time I managed to create a new industrial process which was later commercialized.

I also designed a plant for processing industrial waste into useful products that was brought into operation for only 70% the cost of an imported facility – work which became an inspiration to factory workers all over Tanzania.

## **What happened then?**

I then worked for two years with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) on projects relating to the environmentally sound management of cities and municipalities (Sustainable Cities Programme); promotion of solar and other sources of energy to reduce global warming; and water and sanitation.

After leaving UNDP I headed a Centre for Development and Transfer of Technology, before becoming Executive Director of the Basel Convention Regional Centre on 1 August 2001.

## **What about this job interested you?**

I saw the Basel Convention as a very important international tool which stood to assist the developing countries, especially in Africa.

## **What did you do first?**

The Centre set the scene in 2001 with a visit to every country to establish their capacity building needs relating to hazardous waste management. The idea was that the Centre should respond first to the most pressing needs, and therefore needed to be relevant, reliable and dynamic.

**Do you find the governments as cooperative and enthusiastic as you would hope?**  
Very much so. I would like to pay special

tribute to them for covering all the local costs of the many country and regional awareness-raising courses we organized.

## **What are your biggest challenges?**

In Africa we are faced with many challenges related to hazardous wastes. Among these, one of the biggest is the issue of medical waste. This type of waste poses a bigger threat to human health than the general public and other officials perceive, by contributing to the incidence of infectious disease throughout the region.

There a number of gaps in the way medical waste is managed, from its generation to its final disposal.

## **What do you suggest be done?**

There is scope for instituting short, intermediate and long-term solutions, engaging with all who have responsibility for handling these wastes. These range from hospital ward cleaners, through nurses, hospital administrators and health officials, to Ministries.

The starting point in our case has been raising awareness, not only of the potential risk posed by medical waste but also to the roles and responsibilities of officials, many of whom might see this kind of waste as the responsibility of junior officers.

Our experience shows that medical waste management is best tackled in close collaboration with solid waste management initiatives.

## **How has your work over the last two years affected the lives of ordinary people in Africa?**

I take great satisfaction in the number of personnel who have benefited from the training we have organized. I am also gratified at the amount of interest and commitment shown from an ever-greater number of countries.

Our work is about bringing the various parties together – those who generate the waste, those affected by it, those responsible for educating the public and decision-makers, those who finance public works, those who formulate policy.

We start with a general awareness campaign, exemplified by workshops we con-



ducted in Zambia, The Gambia and Mauritius. The results were exciting: in each of these countries the stakeholders developed a framework for medical waste management particular to their own situations.

## **What lies ahead?**

I feel we need to focus even more on providing awareness activities in hazardous waste management for policy and decision makers; technical training in specific issues such as medical waste; new courses in international environmental treaties for government officials; information exchange; technology transfer activities; and development of an accredited curriculum for hazardous waste management suited to Africa.

The bottom line is to move towards creation of a pool of trainers by transforming the technical material into material for the 'training of trainers'.

## **What has been your greatest source of personal satisfaction, so far?**

I have very been moved by the way the governments and institutions are taking us very seriously, and see us as a reliable source of advice. The increasing level of commitment from governments and the private sector is very encouraging.

We are also beginning to receive a great many inquiries about the services the Centre offers. This growing interest poses a formidable but welcome challenge!

**For the complete version of this interview, see the Basel Convention website at [www.basel.int](http://www.basel.int). For more on the activities of the Regional Centre visit [www.baselpretoria.org.za/](http://www.baselpretoria.org.za/)**



# One World, Don't Waste it!

## Mobile phones:

### A powerful partnership

By 2005, more than 130 million mobile phones weighing about 65,000 tons will be retired annually in the USA alone. Most of these will be stored away in closets and drawers, creating a stockpile of about 500 million used mobile phones weighing over 250,000 tons. Greater quantities will be created as the wireless revolution grips the developing world and the use of mobile phones increases.

All this material will enter the waste stream, at some point.

The mobile phone manufacturers have done much to redesign these products to minimize the amount of waste and improve the recycling capacity of the devices. In December 2002, the major manufacturers publicly declared their commitment to work further with the Basel Convention and other stakeholders in improving the sound environmental management of mobile phones. In April 2003, together with interested countries and other stakeholders, they participated in the first meeting of the Basel Convention Mobile Phone Working Group to develop a concrete work programme for a Mobile Phone Partnership Initiative, designed to combat the waste challenge presented by mobile phones.

Despite improvements over recent years, mobile phones can still contain components that require waste management solutions including:

- Persistent and bioaccumulative chemicals (PBTs) that can accumulate in the fatty tissues of animals to toxic levels, even when released in very small quantities;
- Brominated flame retardants which can be damaging to human health and the environment and which can be a major barrier to recycling plastics;
- Lead, long recognized as a major threat to human health and the environment;
- Rechargeable batteries. Although the more dangerous nickel-cadmium (Ni-Cd) batteries have been largely phased out by a responsible industry, their lithium-ion and nickel-metal hydride replacements contain cobalt, copper, nickel and zinc – heavy metals that still need to be kept out of disposal facilities.



Directives adopted in the European Union will drive further innovative responses to the environmental challenges posed by these products within Europe. However the manufacturers of these products and the Basel Convention are committed to a partnership that will develop an effective global response, to ensure that the economic and social benefits society reaps from such devices are balanced with environmentally sound management.

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## Publications in 2002



Destruction and Decontamination Technologies for PCBs and other POPs Wastes under the Basel Convention, Vols. A and B (English)

Global Trends in Generation and Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes (English)

Préparation d'un plan national pour la gestion écologiquement

rationnelle des PCBs et des équipements contaminés aux PCBs dans le cadre de la mise en œuvre de la Convention de Bâle (French)

For a full list of publications available from the Basel Convention Secretariat, visit the website: [www.basel.int](http://www.basel.int)

### BECOME A PARTNER

Whether you're a corporation, NGO, foundation or government agency, partnering with the Basel Convention is simple. The Secretariat will work with you to create a tailored programme to meet your needs. There are many benefits to forming a partnership with the Basel Convention, including:

- Access to the expert capacity of the Secretariat, more than 150 Parties to the Basel Convention, and more than 15 Basel Convention Regional Centres around the globe;
- Opportunities to leverage your funds or resources with those of other Partners.

Forging a partnership with the Basel Convention is a smart investment in a better world.

To discuss your interest in partnering with the Basel Convention, contact Milton Catelin, Basel Convention Partnerships. Tel: +41 (0)22 917 8227 or e-mail: [milton.catelin@unep.ch](mailto:milton.catelin@unep.ch)