

PRESS RELEASE

NGOs appeal for stronger implementation of the Aarhus Convention for environmental democracy

[Riga, 11 June, 2008] – Today in Riga, under the auspices of the European ECO Forum [1], around 100 NGOs from 33 countries agreed upon their demands for the future of the Aarhus Convention at the start of the third Meeting of Parties to the Convention. [2]

The European ECO Forum stresses an unacceptable imbalance between the three pillars of the Convention, referring to access to information, public participation and access to justice in environmental matters. The ECO Forum outlines key tasks for the Parties to the Convention to achieve during the meeting in Riga. The major appeals made by NGOs are to:

- Ensure substantial improvement of the reporting process, including effective public participation.
- Establish a public participation task force to help improve the implementation of articles 6, 7 and 8 of the Convention.
- Remove financial and institutional barriers to achieving access to justice.
- Improve compliance with the Convention and increase the role of the Compliance Committee.
- Ensure that the composition of the Compliance Committee is balanced on the basis of geography, expertise and gender.
- Assert the Long Term Strategic Plan of the Aarhus Convention, rejecting the unacceptable systematic effort by the European Union to dilute this Plan.

The Meeting of Parties is expected to adopt decisions on non-compliance by several Parties based on the conclusions of the Compliance Committee. The European ECO Forum insisted on stronger measures to be applied to the countries which have not made any progress in implementing previous decisions on compliance. On 10 June, in disappointment with the official reluctance to take strong measures against Ukraine and Turkmenistan, the European ECO Forum decided to issue an NGO caution to these two countries.

Parties to the pan-European region's flagship environmental democracy treaty are marking the 10th anniversary of the adoption of the Aarhus Convention at the third Meeting of the Parties to the Convention in Riga, Latvia from 11 to 13 June 2008. The Aarhus Convention is the most important legal instrument providing for citizens' rights on access to environmental information, public participation in decision-making and access to justice in environmental matters.

Drawing on the experiences of the first decade of the Convention, the Meeting in Riga is attracting over 400 participants from more than 40 countries, including representatives from Convention Parties' and Signatories' environment ministries, environmental citizens' organisations and other stakeholders.

A press conference **outlining NGO achievements and future plans** will be held on FRIDAY 13 JUNE at 9:15 AM immediately after the UNECE's official press conference.

A copy of the **NGO Riga Appeal** is attached.

For further information please contact:-

Vanessa Bulkacz, European Environmental Bureau (EEB) Press & Publications Officer,
vanessa.bulkacz@eeb.org (EN/FR)

Iulia Trombitaia, European ECO Forum Communication Unit /Eco-Accord, iulia@neostrada.pl (EN/RU)

Mara Silina, Public Participation Campaign Coordinator and Chair of the Coordination Board of the European ECO Forum, mara.silina@eeb.org; tel: +32 472 505 031 (EN/RU/LV)

Editor's Notes:-

[1] The European ECO Forum (www.eco-forum.org) is an ad hoc coalition of more than 200 NGOs working together on the Environment for Europe (EfE) process. EfE brings together environment ministers, international organisations and NGOs working on environmental policy issues in the UNECE region. The most recent EfE conference took place in Belgrade in October 2007.

The ECO Forum's Public Participation Campaign (PPC) unites environmental citizens' organisations working on access to information, public participation in the decision-making process and access to justice in environmental matters (www.participate.org). The PPC works to achieve full implementation of the Aarhus Convention and expand its coverage in the UNECE region and globally.

[2] The Aarhus Convention is the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters. The Aarhus Convention has 41 parties, including the European Community.