

World News

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WORLD NEWS

By Kevin Gallagher, Rachael Moshman,
Chris McChesney, and Kelly Rain*

AFRICA

CRACKDOWN ON UNREGULATED DOMESTIC IVORY MARKETS

In October 2004, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (“CITES”) adopted an action plan to decrease the unregulated domestic ivory markets across Africa.¹ Domestic ivory markets have been exempt from regulation due to a loophole in the previous CITES ivory trade bans, because such bans have traditionally covered only international markets.² For instance, the trade of elephant leather and hair by Namibia and South Africa is permissible because elephants are not specifically poached for these commodities.³ If enforced, this crackdown will force African countries to address the large-scale and visible ivory trade at the national level.⁴

New legislation resulting from the CITES action plan would attempt to break down the ivory trade by placing the burden of proof of lawful possession upon the person found with ivory.⁵

NAMIBIA MINISTER PROPOSES DRASTICALLY DIFFERENT SAFE WATER ACT

A progressive Water Resource Management Bill was introduced in September 2004 by the Ministry of Agriculture, Water and Rural Development in Namibia.⁶ A key aspect of this bill places the responsibility on the Minister to ensure that safe water is available for basic human functions and necessities.⁷ The new law would create a licensing system for the extraction and use of water and discharge of waste water, excluding abstraction for domestic use.⁸ New institutions such as a Water Advisory Council would be created as a result of this law, which would give advice to the Minister on policies and water resource management issues.⁹

The legislation would also heavily penalize polluters of water.¹⁰ Starting in late October, after discovering that the Ramatex Textile Factory was polluting Windhoek’s water resources, Minister Malima began advocating for even stiffer punishment for water polluters.¹¹

AMERICAS

U.S. SUPREME COURT HEARS CERCLA CASE

Contradictory language in the contribution provision of the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation and Liability Act (“CERCLA”) led the U.S. Supreme Court to hear arguments in *Avail Services, Inc. v Cooper Industries, Inc.*, on

October 6, 2004.¹² The dispute began when Avail Services sought contribution from Cooper Industries in relation to the cleanup of an aircraft engine maintenance sight under CERCLA. Currently, it is unclear as to whether a private company can seek a contribution claim under CERCLA from a company without a prior CERCLA governmental action against it. An en banc decision from the 5th Circuit ruled that the seemingly contradictory language was not meant to limit contribution claims, but that companies are allowed to seek contribution at any time in the clean-up process of a CERCLA site.

STARBUCKS TO INCREASE ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY OF COFFEE

At a conference in San Jose, Costa Rica, Starbucks, the world’s largest coffee chain, announced that it aims to increase the quality of its coffee. The company’s chief green coffee buyer stated that by 2007, 60 percent of Starbucks’ coffee will come from growers who meet specific environmental and social standards. To meet this increased demand, Starbucks has launched a program to reward growers who meet these higher standards.

Presently, Starbucks admits that there may be a shortage in this “higher quality coffee” due to the increased demand, but it intends to use the program both to reach out to existing growers and to foster new development. Industry analysts believe the supply will eventually rise to meet the growing demand for coffee that meets higher environmental and social standards.¹³

ASIA

GENE TEST REVEALS ARSENIC-CREATING MICROBE IN DRINKING WATER

In a study released in the October 15, 2004 issue of *Science*, scientists reported the creation of a gene test to identify the microscopic organisms that are a key factor in the arsenic contamination of drinking water throughout Asia.¹⁴ The test identifies a gene that allows the microbe to convert a harmless form of arsenic into a toxic form. The microbes are from a family of metal-reducing bacteria that breathe metal by passing electrons onto the surface of the metal. The reduction process causes changes in the metal’s characteristics and then releases metal into the environment. The test, which can be performed in one day, uses a primer to identify whether any of thirteen species of bacteria are present in a water sample.¹⁵ The scientists believe

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this test will augment the standard chemical and mineralogical methods of identifying arsenic-contaminated water.¹⁶

A high level arsenic exposure can lead to a wide range of health problems, including cancer, diabetes, high blood pressure, and reproductive disorders.¹⁷

The problem of arsenic in drinking water peaked in India and Bangladesh in the early 1990s in what the World Health Organization described as the “worst mass poisoning in human history.”¹⁸ While the problem is still most severe in India and Bangladesh, it persists today throughout Asia, wherever tube wells are drilled and installed in an effort to prevent “diarrhea-related problems associated with surface-water use.”

MT. EVEREST ENDANGERED?

In the last thirty years, snow and ice cover has decreased by about thirty percent in the Himalayas.¹⁹ The loss of snow and ice, due to climate change, has led a group of environmental activists and lawyers to ask the United Nations Education, Science, and Cultural Organization (“UNESCO”) to place Everest National Park, which includes Mt. Everest, on the World Heritage Danger list.²⁰ Member countries of UNESCO are legally bound to protect sites on the World Heritage Danger list.²¹ Environmentalists, including Pro-Public (Friends of the Earth – Nepal), hope to use UNESCO recognition of the park to force member countries to take action against global warming in the area. The director of Pro-Public explained the site’s significance: “if this mountain is threatened by climate change, then we know the situation is deadly serious. If we fail to act, we are failing future generations. . . .”²²

EURASIA

RUSSIA RATIFIES THE KYOTO PROTOCOL

Russia, which produces 17 percent of the world’s global emissions, formally ratified the Kyoto Protocol on November 19, 2004.²³ Created in 1997 to encourage industrialized nations to cut gas emissions by the year 2012,²⁴ the Kyoto Protocol required support from countries which together create 55 percent of the world’s gas emissions.²⁵ In 2001, when the United States, the world’s largest producer of emissions, chose not to participate in the Kyoto Protocol, Russia’s participation became integral to the survival of the Protocol.²⁶

ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION LINKED TO SOUTHERN CAUCASUS INSTABILITY

A report by the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (“OSCE”), the United Nations Development Programme, and the United Nations Environment Programme released a report stating that environmental degradation and access to natural resources in the Southern Caucasus may aggravate already-present conflicts in the area.²⁷ In Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and nearby regions of Azerbaijan, citizens face issues concerning the control of international river basins and the destruction of old Soviet weapons and chemicals.²⁸ Recognizing that environmental and resource issues

might either frustrate or resolve a politically tense situation, the OSCE and U.N. organizations have extended their Environment and Security Initiative to the Southern Caucasus, thereby directing resources toward positively affecting the environment and political stability.²⁹

MIDDLE EAST

RESTORING THE FERTILE CRESCENT

Iraq is home to what was once referred to as the Fertile Crescent, an important marsh ecosystem. Twelve years ago, however, the area was nearly wiped out by Saddam Hussein, who ordered its destruction in an attempt to eradicate the Marsh Arabs who had unsuccessfully staged a rebellion against him in 1991.³⁰ Only an estimated seven percent of the marshes remained in 2002. The area was home to several now endangered species such as the African Darter.³¹

The Iraqi Government, with the aid from the United Nations Environment Programme, is now overseeing an international effort to restore these wetlands. One of the major projects conducted in 2003 was to remove many of the dams and canals that originally diverted the flow of water. These acts alone re-flooded approximately 40 percent of the wetlands and have begun a recovery effort for the region.³²

The international effort may also allow for limited drilling in the region, as some geologists believe that millions of barrels of oil lie underneath the area.³³

RED DEAD INITIATIVE

Jordan, Israel, and the Palestinian Authority developed the Red Dead Initiative in Summer 2004 as an effort to prevent further decrease of the Dead Sea’s water level.³⁴ Promoted in June at a multinational water management conference taking place at the Dead Sea, Jordan appealed to the international community to save this unique body of water from extinction.³⁵ With water level decreasing at one meter per year, the future of the lowest point on the planet is bleak.³⁶ A proposal has been offered to pump over two billion cubic meters of water through a channel from the Red Sea to the Dead Sea, which will thereby allow water levels to rise and prevent possible earthquakes and sink holes.³⁷ The project is estimated to cost USD \$1 billion, and financing is expected mainly to come from international sources.³⁸ If water is not pumped into the Dead Sea, it is projected that the world’s saltiest body of water will disappear within fifty years.



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ENDNOTES: WORLD NEWS

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