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Ministers to Tackle Increasing Air Pollution in Sub-Saharan African Cities

Regional Conference on Better Air Quality in African Cities kicks off in Nairobi

Nairobi, 25 July 2006 – Several studies show that the air quality in African cities is rapidly deteriorating. Urban air pollution in African cities is emerging as a key threat to health, environment, economy and quality of life of millions of Africans as the levels of urbanization, motorization and economic activity increase.

Poor air quality has impacts on the health, especially on the poor, the elderly and the children who suffer disproportionately from the effects. Urban air pollution also has impacts far beyond city boundaries as pollution is found on crops far away from the city and it contributes to global environment issues such as climate change. Air pollution is thus emerging as a key threat to human health, the environment and the quality of life of millions of Africans.

To raise awareness and develop a framework for action to address the growing urban air pollution in Africa, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the World Bank's Clean Air Initiative for Africa (CAI-Africa), the Air Pollution Information Network for Africa (APINA), the Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI) and the United States Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA) are jointly organizing a regional conference entitled "Better Air Quality for African Cities (BAQ-Africa 2006)". The Conference kicks off tomorrow 25 July 2006 at UNEP Headquarters in Nairobi, Kenya.

Achim Steiner, Under Secretary General of the United Nations and Executive Director of UNEP said: "Africa's urbanization is the highest in the world and this, alongside a rise in the number of vehicles, are among the factors that are leading to a decline in air quality with all the health problems this entails. At the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002 a promise was made to rid sub-Saharan Africa of leaded petrol. It is a partnership that has worked and a promise that has been fulfilled".

"Let us begin to make some more promises and to meet these too. We now have a promise to tackle the high level of sulphur in Africa's transport fuels that contribute to particle pollution. Let us forge ones on other vehicle-related pollutants and make ones to end the appalling illness and death rates linked with indoor air pollution," he added.

"In order to achieve these goals, we must develop new and even wider partnerships that ally fuel and car companies but also town planners, urban managers and the full spectrum of civil society. Partnerships that encompass environment ministers, but also ones responsible for health, energy, transport and finance," said Mr Steiner.

Cities all over Sub-Saharan Africa face this challenge. Studies show that in Lagos, Nigeria, the level of very small particulates is very high, while a UNEP study shows high levels of lead in the air in Nairobi. Industrial pollution, agricultural burning, waste burning, use of old motor vehicles, poor fuel quality and infrastructure coupled with a lack of enforceable air quality and emission standards have all worsened the situation. Exposure of people to indoor air pollution due to

biomass burning in open stove cooking and heating is an additional compromising factor which exacerbates people's cardio-respiratory problems.

Many African countries and cities want to come up with policies to address this, but at the same time in many other African countries this issue is not on the agenda of the decision makers. Although urban air pollution is becoming a major cause of urban poverty and ill health, there has been little progress in addressing urban air pollution in Africa.

This regional conference, Better Air Quality in Sub-Saharan African cities 2006 (BAQ-Africa 2006), will bring together experts, policy makers and decision makers. About 40 Sub-Saharan Ministers, representatives from international organizations, the private sector, and non-governmental organizations. The conference will include a Training Session, a Policy Session and a Ministerial Session.

The overall objective of BAQ-Africa 2006 will be to forge links between existing air quality related initiatives and networks to achieve greater regional collaboration and to develop a strategic approach to Air Quality Management AQM and control in the region. It aims to increase the awareness of African decision makers with regard to urban air pollution issues and the need to take action to address deteriorating air quality in African cities.

The conference will also provide basic training in the principles of Air Quality Management (AQM), review and discuss the current status of AQM in Sub-Saharan Africa, discuss how stakeholders can benefit from worldwide experience in AQM and promote AQM policies and initiatives to achieve better air quality in Sub-Saharan Africa.

BAQ-Africa 2006 is expected to come up with concrete recommendations and proposals for policy actions - for example on the harmonization/improvement of fuel quality Africa-wide and policies on -old- vehicles incl. requirements for imports of second hand vehicles as part of the African wide effort to improve fuel quality, regulation on the vehicles, including quality of important and existing vehicles, other sources, such as waste burning and industries, and the huge impact of indoor air pollution to many Africans.

Notes to Editors

BAQ-Africa 2006 will be a four day conference. The first two days (25-26 July) will consist of a training course on the key elements of AQM for African cities aimed at technical governmental staff. A multi-stakeholder policy dialogue on air quality policies in sub-Saharan will be held on 26-27 July and a Ministerial Session focusing on air quality policy will be held on 28 July.

BAQ-Africa 2006 builds on the success of BAQ-Africa 2004 which was held on 21-23 April 2004 in Johannesburg, South Africa and hosted by APINA and SEI.

UNEP and other agencies involved, including the World Bank, USEPA, APINA, SEI, are already working on programs to assist Africa to address this urgent issue. For example, UNEP took the lead in phasing out leaded petrol from Sub Saharan Africa.

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