

MESSAGE FOR WORLD ENVIRONMENT DAY 2010
PRESIDENT OF RUSSIA
H.E. DMITRY MEDVEDEV

Every year on June 5 the globe marks World Environment Day. This day has been marked around the planet since 1972, although Russia has been taking part only since 2007. But as they say, better late than never, and indeed, it took us a while, but we have, fortunately, finally woken up to the vital importance of protecting nature, to the realisation that economic and environmental development go hand in hand, and to the awareness that without strict compliance with environmental standards we simply will have no future at all.

These seem to be self-evident things, but it took quite a long time for this awareness to reach all quarters of our society, for everyone, ordinary citizens, and – most important – the state authorities, to realise that this is our common task; this is the responsibility of officials at every level and of each and every one of us. Insolent disregard for nature can have large-scale and highly unpredictable consequences, after all.

Events in the Gulf of Mexico have grabbed worldwide attention. We all see the giant oil slicks and the dead marine life. This should make us realise that we cannot even imagine the full consequences of disasters of this kind. We cannot fully seize their visual reality, let alone the entire legal and financial consequences, or the full effects they have on the natural environment. We therefore need to look at what further measures we can take at the global level to prevent such disasters.

First, we need to insure ourselves as best we can against the possibility of such disasters. Second, we need to put in place a modern framework of international law in this area, perhaps in the form of a convention or several agreements that will address issues of the kind arising from disasters such as that in the Gulf of Mexico. Yes, we have international laws, international maritime law, for example, which addresses a whole series of matters, but I am sure that the scale of this disaster, the scale of such other potential disasters, goes beyond the legal framework currently in place.

Perhaps we should consider setting up a global fund, into which countries would put money for insuring or re-insuring against these sorts of risks, because in some cases even the richest companies and countries might not have enough money. I believe this is something worth looking at, worth discussing. Russia could put forward an initiative in this area. I think I will raise this subject at the G20 summit in Canada later this month.

Of course, there are also good examples, positive developments that we can learn from. We know that there are countries that have made immense progress in environmental issues. In Finland, for example, an oil refinery and one of Europe's biggest oil terminals are located very close to a nature reserve, but it turns out that they can coexist in harmony. So, we see that it is possible to build pipelines and at the same time listen to bird songs, breathe fresh air, and simply enjoy life. This is an excellent example.

Russia too offers such examples. We see them in some of the new facilities we have built. I am not saying that they are all ideal from an environmental point of view, but the new facilities built in the Far East, Irkutsk Region and a few other locations are modern installations that differ greatly from their predecessors. I note too by the way that we also have examples of successful modernisation of existing production facilities. I recently visited the Novolipetsk Steel, which offers an example of modern production facilities measuring up to the latest standards. Unfortunately, we still have too few of these examples.

Sadly, we inherited from the Soviet Union a huge number of problems – more than two billion tons of industrial waste. Just think – two billion tons! Then of course there are also the worn out treatment facilities that can no longer cope, and lots of places where the environmental situation has become quite simply life-threatening.

Only in recent years have concepts such as energy-efficiency, energy saving, green investment, green economy, green technology, and green energy become part of our lives. These are trendy areas today. I believe we need to look at these issues not just in purely environmental terms but also from the economic point of view. I have said many times that people only start tackling environmental issues when the economy forces them to. I met just recently with industrialists and environmentalists and found myself thinking on that occasion that it is absolutely correct to state that the environment and the economy do not contradict each other. A properly functioning economy is an environmentally friendly economy.

I see quite a lot of comments on my blog about environmental matters. People here are complaining about environmental pollution, about emission levels above the legal limits, and the proximity of rubbish dumps. What can we do about these kinds of problems? We need to take the initiative ourselves, clean up our country. People write about this on my blog. Ruslan from Bryansk Region, for example, said that we need laws regulating people's behaviour in this area. Igor Gulyayev from Moscow proposes putting money into environmental awareness education. These are simple-sounding but absolutely correct proposals.

I agree that we need to combat environmental ignorance and indifference. Our school curriculum does not offer any kind of environmental education. This was an issue that environmentalists raised recently too when I met with them. Environmental education should indeed start in childhood. If children do not learn about it from the earliest age, if it is not taught in schools, people will not develop any kind of normal environmental awareness.

Of course, we have other tasks to address too, issues concerning the regional and municipal authorities, issues regarding proper location of natural sites, and the question of communication with environmental protection groups and organisations.

I am sure that much depends on the consolidated efforts of all of us, of every person in every town and village. Look at other countries' experience: caring for nature starts with the individual. If people take pride in and care for their own homes and surroundings they will demand that the authorities show this same care and attention, and will not let themselves be forced into a dead end. If need be, they will raise their voices in protest.

I therefore believe that this discussion on the environment, on our life's environment, deserves to be continued, and this is something I will focus on in my next Address to the Federal Assembly.