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Ozone Layer Under Intense Stress as Governments Meet to Plan Next Steps

Ougadougou, Burkina Faso/Nairobi, 1 December 2000 – At a time when damage to the ozone layer has reached record levels and is being accelerated by global warming, the world's governments are meeting in Burkina Faso from 11–14 December to ensure the phase-out of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) and other chemicals under the Montreal Protocol.

"While enormous progress has been made over the past decade in phasing out ozone-destroying chemicals, the health of the ozone layer remains critical", said Klaus Toepfer, Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme, under whose auspices the 1987 Montreal Protocol on Substances That Deplete the Ozone Layer was adopted".

"Our key task for the next decade – and for the meeting here in Ougadougou – is to complete the effort of the previous decade to ensure that developing countries have the financial and technological resources they need to make a full transition to ozone- friendly economies".

Last September, satellite measurements revealed that the stratospheric ozone "hole" over the Antarctic had reached a record 28.3 million square kilometers (some one million sq. km more than the previous record, in 1998). Earlier in the year, ozone depletion over northern latitudes also reached record levels, leading to predictions of a second ozone hole over the Arctic; such an event would expose many millions of people to dangerous doses of ultraviolet-B radiation.

The danger is that ozone-destroying chemicals are long-lasting and take time to travel up to the stratosphere. Chemicals released years ago are still present in the atmosphere and are contributing to today's peak concentrations. Meanwhile, global climate change is thought to be slowing the ozone layer's healing process. The warming of the atmosphere near the ground causes the stratosphere to become even colder. Cold stratospheric temperatures, particularly during the early Antarctic spring, catalyze the chemical processes that destroy ozone molecules.

Officials from the Protocol's 175 member governments will attend a preparatory segment on 11 and 12 December before adopting decisions during the high-level segment of the 12th Meeting of the Parties to the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer on 13 and 14 December.

A key item on the Meeting's agenda is a review of developing countries' 1999 data reports on CFCs. Under the Protocol, developing countries were committed to freezing their CFC emissions at average 1995-97 levels during the 12-month period that ended 30 June 2000. They must now start reducing rapidly in order to achieve a 50% cut by the year 2005; the deadline for a complete phase-out is 2010. Developed countries stopped using these chemicals almost completely in 1996.

An analysis of the 1998 data shows that CFC consumption in 63 developing countries is already less than or equal to the 1995-97 baseline, meaning that they are on track to meeting their phase-out commitments. In addition, eight of the nine developing countries that are CFC producers have cut production to below baseline levels. The 1999 data will provide an even better indication of whether developing countries are meeting the CFC freeze, but the final status of compliance will be determined only on the basis of the year 2000 data.

These encouraging figures are strongly linked to the success of the Multilateral Fund, whose Executive Committee is also meeting here, from 2 to 8 December. Since 1991, the Fund has disbursed more than US\$1 billion for phasing out the consumption of 135,000 tonnes of CFCs and halons, and the production of nearly 37,000 tonnes, in over 110 developing countries.

Another issue to be discussed in Ougadougou is a proposal by the European Community to tighten the Protocol's phase-out schedule for developing-country consumption of hydrochlorofluorocarbons (HCFCs) – a leading substitute for CFCs. The proposal is based on the concern that, while much less destructive than CFCs, HCFCs do contribute to ozone depletion and other substitutes are now available on the market.

Currently, developing countries are committed to freezing their use of HCFCs in 2016 and to phasing them out completely by 2040. The EC proposal calls for moving the freeze up to 2007 and setting four interim reduction targets before the 2040 phase-out. Other items to be decided

by the Meeting include measures to facilitate the transition from CFC-based metered-dose inhalers used by asthma sufferers, efforts to prevent illegal traffic, new ozone-depleting substances entering the market, exemptions for the use of controlled substances as process agents in the chemicals industry, and other technical matters. While the Protocol itself has been ratified by 175 governments and the Copenhagen Amendment by 111 governments, the subsequent amendments containing important new controls still need many more ratifications, especially the 1997 Montreal Amendment (only 46 ratifications so far) and the 1999 Beijing Amendment (only one ratification).

Under the 1987 Montreal Protocol, governments have agreed to phase out chemicals that destroy stratospheric ozone, which is essential for shielding humans, plants and animals from the damaging effects of ultraviolet light. Scientists predict that the ozone layer will start to recover in the near future and will fully recover some time in the 21st century- but only if the Protocol continues to be vigorously enforced.

Note to journalists:

The meeting will be held at the Ougadougou International Conference Centre. For interviews or additional information, please contact Michael Graber, Deputy Executive Secretary, Ozone Secretariat, UNEP, Tel: +254-2-623855, Fax: +254-2-623913, Email: michael.graber@unep.org. Official documents and other materials are available on the Internet at www.unep.org/ozone/ or www.unep.ch/ozone/. The government of Burkino Faso has posted a web site at www.ozone2000.bf

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