

Conference: EU, wider Asia split on environment

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NAGOYA — Japan and the European Union may speak of environmental technologies, like cars with fuel cells and recycling policies, as solutions to environmental problems, but many nations in Asia are still developing industrially and need roads and bridges before cars, while economic development often comes before recycling education.

That is one of the main conclusions of the 2nd EU-Japan-Asia Journalists Conference, which took place in Nagoya from April 17 to 20. Nearly 60 journalists, diplomats and academics from the European Union, Asia and Japan were on hand for the event.

The theme of this year's conference was the environment, an especially appropriate topic given the fact that the Kyoto Protocol entered into force earlier this year and the nearby Aichi Expo has been emphasizing technological solutions to environmental problems. Most of the speakers gave presentations on how the Japanese government and the business community are working on environmental technologies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

At the opening session, Seizo Matsumoto, vice minister for Global Environmental Affairs, Ministry of the Environment, explained what Japan has been doing in regard to climate change, noting that Japan itself is feeling the effects of climate change.

"Last year, we had an extremely hot summer. The temperature in Tokyo reached a record-breaking 39.5 degrees. We also saw records broken regarding both the number and the scale of typhoons that hit Japan last year," Matsumoto said.

In late April, Matsumoto said, the government will be

finalizing the Kyoto Protocol Target Achievement Plan to meet Japan's commitments under the Kyoto Protocol, which call for a 6 percent reduction of 1990 levels of greenhouse gas emissions.

The most contentious issue in Japan regarding greenhouse gas reductions is whether or not to implement an environmental tax on businesses. Many businesses, Matsumoto said, are opposed to a tax, but he voiced his support, saying such a tax is crucial to meeting the Kyoto Protocol target.

While Matsumoto outlined the national government's broad environmental policies, Masashi Kato, deputy director general of Nagoya's Planning and Coordination Bureau, spoke on his city's specific efforts to curb environmental pollution.

"By the end of the 20th century, Nagoya faced a serious waste problem. City residents produced 1.3 kg of garbage per person per day at homes, offices and shops," Kato said.

In Japan, most waste is incinerated, and in Nagoya's case, the large amount of waste burned meant that landfill space was quickly filling up. Realizing that the entire city would soon become one huge dump if efforts weren't made to reduce the amount of garbage, the city began, in 1999, a policy of separating and recycling plastic and paper containers.

"Today, bottles and cans are being recycled, as well as plastic and paper containers. In addition, newspapers and corrugated cardboard is being collected and recycled. Thanks to these efforts, garbage amounts have been reduced by 30 percent; the amount of materials recycled has more than doubled; and the amount of landfill waste has been halved," Kato said.

But it was in the area of fu-

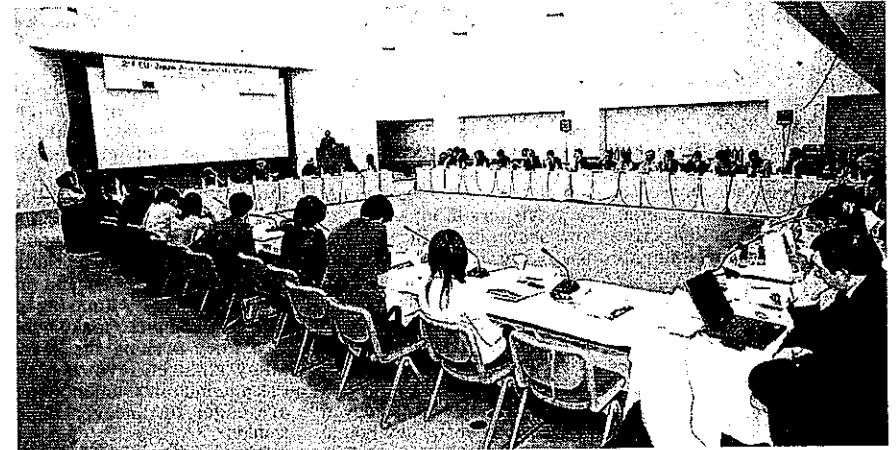
turistic environmental technologies, especially the development of fuel-cell batteries and liquid fuels, like biodiesel, that much of the conference focused upon. Trips to both a Toyota plant as well as the Toyota pavilion at the Aichi Expo focused on the company's fuel-cell cars. While fuel-cell automobiles still constitute a small fraction of Toyota's overall sales worldwide, they are being touted as a solution for countries like China, where automobile use is growing rapidly.

For many of the journalists present, Toyota's efforts in fuel-cell research are well-known. Less well-known were the efforts by Japanese companies to develop biodiesel, which can be made using vegetable oil. Sol Yoshida, honorary ambassador to several Scandinavian countries and the president of a company that makes biodiesel products, noted that it releases far less sulfur than ordinary diesel fuel. As biodiesel fuel can be made from organic materials, like coconut oil, it has potential especially in the Asian region.

Participants heard much about the practical measures Japanese government officials and bureaucrats have been taking to combat pollution. But the presentations also exposed fundamental differences in thinking about the environment between many of the EU journalists and their Asian counterparts.

While welcoming specific technological developments, several of the Asian participants focused on the larger issues, especially the growing economic divide between the developed and the developing worlds and what that divide means for discussions on international environmental issues.

Emil Salim, a leading environmentalist from Indonesia



ASIAN AND EUROPEAN journalists are in session at the 2nd EU-Japan-Asia Journalists Conference in Nagoya, Aichi Prefecture, on April 20.

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who served as state minister for Population and the Environment between 1978 and 1993, noted that the fundamental causes are due to the fact that development issues over the past half century have reflected an ego-centered approach, with the economy, not the environment, as the main system of development.

"In order to escape from this vicious circle, we need a paradigm shift in the thinking of people and governments from individual egoism to the idea of community-centered development. The ecosystem must take priority over economics as the main system for development, while, rather than exploiting natural resources, we need to add value to natural resources," Salim said.

Salim proposed a number of solutions, including sustainable water management, sustainable energy development, including energy efficiency and a shift to renewable energies, and the promotion of zero carbon emissions in transportation, the construction in-

dustry and urban development.

As a former politician, however, Salim is under no illusions as to how difficult it is to carry out such policies, especially in developing countries, where economic growth at the expense of the environment is an entrenched philosophy.

"In many countries, the post of Environment minister is a weak post, subordinate to the finance and commerce industries," he admitted.

Salim's comments, while welcomed by many of the journalists present, were also greeted with some skepticism. Throughout the seminar, many of those from the EU and Japan stressed the importance of the environment. But, at the same time, many of those from Asia said they felt at times they were being lectured to by the developed world on the importance of the environment.

"Why is it that developed countries are always telling countries that aren't as economically prosperous as they are that the environment is so important?" asked Huynh

Van Hoa, of The Saigon Times.

Even some of the newer members of the European Union, especially former Soviet bloc countries, suggested that a major concern is that some in the international environment movement fail to understand the importance of economic growth.

"I think we need to agree that both economic and environmental growth are important and can coexist," said Pavlina Kvapilova, from Czech Radio.

And while Japan and some in the EU talked of advanced technologies for automobiles as solutions for reducing greenhouse gas emissions, some in Asia feel that such ideas are still very premature for their countries.

"Many of the Asian journalists note that, before environmentally friendly automobiles, their countries need roads and bridges to drive those cars on," said Cho Hong-Sup, of the South Korean Hankyoreh Daily Newspaper.