

Business Times

Maldives a 'technology lab' towards reducing carbon in the world

By Feizal Samath in the Maldives

MALE – The Maldives Islands, which is aiming to be a zero-carbon nation by 2020 ahead of any other country, is like a 'lab' of technology for the world where future ways of reducing carbon into the atmosphere is developed here before being implemented across the world.

"In a way, the Maldives is like a laboratory (for the world) where you start assessing new technology (to reduce carbon emissions) and set it up here before doing so outside," says Rajendra Shende, head of OzonAction at the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP).

He said the country's more than 300,000 residents 'doesn't stop surprising the world. The Maldives is now inviting the entire world here to tell them how to do it (be carbon neutral)." Andrew Cox, UNDP representative here, has seen the government's determination to fight global warming, climate change and phase out of hydrochlorofluorocarbons (HCFCs) by 2020, or 10 years ahead of all other countries.. "In the Maldives it's an issue of survival (islands going under water). If you don't get it right here – you won't get it right elsewhere."

One technology being considered is using sea water, from a depth of over 100 metres, as a natural refrigerant for cooling systems, particularly in air conditioners and refrigerators. All these thoughts and ideas emerged at a 2-day technology road-show in Male, the capital on May 9-10 which brought industry, technocrats and government officials from 22 countries including the five largest economies in the world – US, China, Japan, India and Germany, showcasing technological advances and knowledge.

More than 20 leading manufacturers of refrigeration and air-conditioning products from around the world exhibited their equipment and technologies in Asia's first ever ozone- and climate-friendly technology exhibition.

Housing Minister Mohamed Aslam said the Maldives is fully committed to a greener development path. "With the technology being available, governments should take steps to make it (technology) available for the people to use. Lessons can be learnt from the Maldives. I think we are on the brink of changing the order to transform to green technology."

Last year, the Maldives – the lowest country on the planet with islands barely seven feet above water, made a historic decision to phase out HCFCs by 2020, along with its carbon neutrality policy, 10 years ahead of the Montreal Protocol phase-out schedule.

If in 2010 it was worry about islands sinking, then this year the climate change-savvy country says there are much more serious issues. "Sea level is rising but that's not our main challenge," noted Mr Aslam, adding that shifting of islands when the sea level rises is a more complex issue.

"The islands are a dynamic feature and when sea level rises there would be changes. If you look at the morphology (structure of organism) these islands sit within a reef system. As the water level rises the hydrodynamics within the reef system will also change.

So the nodes for which we find the equilibrium for island formation will shift and change and with that the islands will start shifting and changing." He said in the case of islands sinking it's just a case of raising the island but the shifting process when sea level rise occurs is more complex and 'there is little (literature) and knowledge (globally) on the dynamics of island shifting."

The Environment Minister, who along with Maldivian President Mohamed Nasheed are involved in the global debate on climate change and sea level rise and whose voices are often heard at an international level, is confident however that a solution would be found. "The challenge is to know when the shift will take place. Naturally what we will do is retain the islands where they are. We can find engineering solutions to that but they are (now) very costly," he told IPS.

Nasheed, grappling with political issues and rising costs of consumer goods that triggered week-long protests, skipped the opening of the conference but turned up at the exhibition the following day, keenly looking at the exhibits and questioning its efficacy.

Among the exhibits was the SolarChill, a vaccine cooler designed for remote areas in developing countries where access to power supplies is difficult. SolarChill uses ozone- and climate-friendly hydrocarbon refrigerants and renewable energy and avoids lead acid batteries, according to UNEP.

The 100-odd tourism resorts, each on an exclusive island account for most of the revenue for the country, and the authorities are acutely conscious of protecting this sector.

According to Tourism Minister, Mariyam Zulfa, the Ministry recently signed a MoU with Swiss-based myclimate to prepare a strategy for voluntary carbon offsetting measures. "We will be looking at things like developing a model eco island as a resort of the future. We are working on the carbon footprint. While the airlines will look after themselves, the resorts are also looking at renewable energy for most of their needs," she said adding however that the biggest challenge is the diesel that goes into generators which are used by all resorts.

UNEP says the Asia Pacific is one of the most vulnerable regions to climate change and impacts are likely to become more intense in future. Rising temperatures and extreme weather events have contributed to loss of crop yield in many countries. Crop yields are projected to decline by a further 10 percent by 2020, the agency said.

"Scientific evidence indicates that the warming of the climate system is linked to human activities that emit greenhouse gases (GHGs). These gases trap heat in the Earth's atmosphere, leading to rising temperatures. This warming trend has already affected all continents and oceans," it said.

Maldivian resort owners say new profits tax is 'worrying'

MALE- A new 3.5 % tax on business profits from July is causing some concern among resort owners in the Maldives mainly because the authorities are not geared to handle the new tax regime.

"The local Tax Department is not geared for and doesn't have the expertise to collect these (new) taxes and there



President Mohamed Nasheed (right), Miss Universe 2005 Natalie Glebova and Environment Minister Mohamed Aslam at the event



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could be a lot of confusion and issues," said a local resort owner. In January, the government introduced a 3.5% Goods & Services Tax of on tourism and collections began last month.

Government officials, who declined to be named, agree that the country doesn't have the expertise to handle the new tax reforms because most of the Maldives tax revenue earlier came from the bed tax from resorts and import duties. They said expert advice from overseas has been brought in to administer the tax and train officials. Tourism provides upto 80% of the total tax revenue of the government, from the 100-odd resorts on the islands some of which are operated and owned by Sri Lanka's Aitken Spence and John Keells.

The Maldives is banking on new tax revenue from resorts and businesses to alleviate the high cost of living through reducing import duties which would eventually bring down consumer prices.

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