

# United Nations Environment Programme not responding to concerns over Sochi Olympics

## The case

In an attempt to cover up scandalous environmental failures, taking place during the preparation for the 2014 Olympic Games, the Organising Committee of Sochi 2014 decided to shield UNEP experts from community leaders during their visit in March 2011.

‘At this moment the regular visit of UNEP experts to Sochi is taking place in connection with the ecological aspects of preparation for Olympic Games 2014. However, today’s situation is different from before: the UNEP visit taking place during these days is completely obscured and kept secret from the public’, Environmental Watch on North Caucasus wrote on 3 March 2011. Neither EWNC, nor any other independent social organisations working in Sochi were informed about UNEP’s visit and neither were they invited to meet UNEP experts.

## The change process

A week earlier EWNC received information about planned UNEP visit from private sources. When EWNC contacted the UNEP experts, they confirmed the validity of information concerning the visit.



Following this confirmation, on February 25 2011 the leader of EWNC, Andrey Rudomakha, sent an official letter to the President of Sochi 2014 Committee Dmitry

Chernyshenko, with a request to organise an advisory meeting with the public organisations and extend an invitation to the advisory meeting to all public organisations, who participated in previous UNEP meetings.

Furthermore, Mr Rudomakha requested to organise visits of UNEP experts accompanied by representatives of EWNC to areas of construction of problematic Olympic facilities.

The Organising Committee did not respond to the official request, while the work of UNEP mission in Sochi was in progress for two days. Upon distributing the request as a press release, the Environmental Watch on North Caucasus received the official letter from the Organising Committee. In this letter they were invited to meet with the UNEP experts. This meeting took place on 3 March. Only EWNC representatives were invited to take part in the meeting. No representatives from other organisations or local communities were included in this invitation.

## The outcome

The United Nations Environment Programme wrapped up its fifth mission to Sochi in March 2011 with UNEP officials monitoring sites of 2014 Winter games development and meeting with locals and environmentalists. EWNC, whose representatives met with UNEP and Sochi organisers, consider UNEP to be completely passive in their monitoring and not willing to convince Russian authorities to consider environmental concerns.

Since 2008, when UNEP and UNESCO helped to move two sporting venues from the vulnerable Grushevy ridge, there has been no effort from the international organisations to effectively mediate the growing conflict between local citizens and environmentalists and the managers of Sochi Olympic construction.

UNEP has not helped with a single environmental problem over the past months and there has been no progress in lowering the negative impact of construction, much of which is done without documentation and has used force against activists who demand workers to provide permission documents.

The following specific problems have been laid out to UNEP's mission repeatedly:

- The destruction of the park on Cape Vidny, where Russia's only population of a rare shrub Montpellier broom (*Teline monspessulana*) was destroyed by Russian Railways. It was two months after UNEP officials promised to find ways of resolving the conflict.

- The construction of a road and bridge over the Achipse river, as well as fortifying the river's bed, all in the protected zone of the UNESCO site Western Caucasus.

- The construction of a VIP residence 700 meters from the border of UNESCO site Western Caucasus in a secluded mountain area near Achipse on the territory where Gazprom is building its skiing venues for the games

- The planned extraction of sand on the shelf of the Black Sea near Anapa, a town known for its sand beaches, in order to supply construction sites in Sochi with inert material. The project will destroy a spawning area for the important flounder species that fishermen rely on, and threatens to erode the beaches in Anapa

- The illegal and unnecessary project of shore fortification in Imeretinskaya lowland which will destroy the area's last natural beach

- The ornithological park project in Imeretinskaya lowland which, though promised to local citizens by Sochi organisers and widely touted as a generous compensatory measure in 2009, is now visible only on maps, since the area has already been covered by construction of hotels and other buildings.

- The clash of residents in villages Vardane and Buu against the planned waste landfill in the area which threatens to pollute both the villages and the Black Sea

No progress has been made on these problems although many of them have persisted for many months and have been relayed to all relevant authorities, including UNEP.

UNEP officials claimed progress has been made with the latest Declaration to restore the Mzymta river, however as EWNC has already argued the document is wholly decorative signed merely for publicity purposes. As if to prove EWNC's point, two days after the declaration, whose clauses include one on transparency,

was signed, one of the signatories, Gazprom, rudely denied access to EWNC activists and UNEP's own expert Theodore Oben, on their Olympic construction site.

### **Lessons learned**

Constant efforts are necessary to secure information about high level international visits and monitoring efforts and provide it to the public, especially when issues of big public interest are at stake. Access to information cannot be taken for granted. The organisations can solve some information issues by developing their own information resources, like list servers and websites. There is a need for further pressure both on state authorities and international organisations in order to protect the Caucasus environment from the construction boom accompanying the preparation for the Sochi Winter Olympics in 2014.

*After EWNC*