Conference: EU, wider Asia split on environment

ERIC JOHNSTON
Staff writer

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 advancements as a means to solve environmental problems. Most of the speakers gave presentations on how they are trying to make the business community work on environmental technologies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

At the opening session, Sei-ko Matsumoto, vice minister for international trade and environment, expressed what Japan has been doing in regard to climate change, noting that Japan itself is feeling the effects of climate change.

"Last year was the hottest in Tokyo reaching a record-breaking 32 degrees. We also saw records broken regarding both the number and the scale of typhoons, 28 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, Masahiko 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 1.2 kg of garbage per person per day. In factories 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 city would soon become a huge dump if efforts weren't made to reduce the amount of garbage, the city began, in 1969, a policy of separating and recycling plastic and paper container contents.

"Today, bottles and cans are being recycled, as well as paper and paper containers. In addition, newspaper and corrugated cardboard is being collected and recycled. Thanks to those 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 futuristic technologies in environmental technologies, especially the development of fuel-cell batteries and hybrid cars, 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 cars are not a substitute for a conventional car, 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. So Yoshihiko, honorary ambassador to several Scandinavian countries and president of Japan, pointed out that companies that make biodiesel products, noted that it releases far less than ordinary diesel fuel. As biodiesel fuel can be made from organic materials, like coconut oil, it has the same environmental benefits of the Asian region.

Participating heard much about the potential of Japanese government officials and bureaucrats to put into action the principles of sharing and cooperation that have been a hallmark of the EU-Japanese relations and their Asian counterparts.

In 1998, the Joint Group for Technological Development, established by the EU Japan-Asian Journalists Conference in Associates for Economic and Environmental Development, was created to discuss the need for change in the Japanese economy, with the understanding that the European Union and its Asian counterparts must take priority in economic 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 energy, and the promotion of zero carbon emissions in transport, the construction industry 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 pace of economic development is a weak point, subordinate to the finance and commercial industries," he admitted.

Salim's comments, while welcomed by many of the journalists present, were also greeted with some scepticism. 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 in the international environment movement too much importance is being placed on the importance of economic growth.

"I think we need to agree that both economic and environmental growth are important and can coexist," said Pavlina Kvalova, 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 Coo Pivod, of the South Korea Hanhorey Daily News paper.