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Focus on APEC #14

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This is the final issue of Focus-on-APEC. The next bulletin will be renamed Focus on Trade, covering a wider range of issues. Walden Bello will report on the WTO Symposium on Trade, Environment and Sustainable Development, 20-21 May 1997, in Geneva, there will be news from the upcoming round of APEC ministers meetings and an assessment of what APEC has achieved and where it is going.

FOCUS was designated the NGO Information/Monitoring Center on APEC (Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation forum) by the participants of the 1995 NGO Forum on APEC in Kyoto, Japan. It was out of this commitment that FOCUS-on-APEC was created. FOCUS-on-APEC carries APEC-related news, the latest items of interest and concern, and informed and critical analysis from a progressive perspective -- with a broad geographical concentration on East Asia and the Western and

South Pacific.

FOCUS-on-APEC is where you can learn about other people's APEC-related work and they can learn about yours. Please send us your APEC-related information (by e-mail, fax or snail-mail!) -- including news items, research papers, opinion pieces and information on grassroots activities happening in your respective country. Your contributions will be incorporated into the bulletins.

We welcome your comments and suggestions!

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----- ASIA-PACIFIC: Growth Won't Be Green Under APEC Free

Trade Johanna Son

MANILA, Mar 20 (IPS) - Free trade in the Asia-Pacific is likely to cause even greater damage to the environment as the economic growth of region's economies accelerates.

East Asia's economic power houses have enriched themselves at a heavy cost to nature, and it has long been evident that such growth is not sustainable.

The Bangkok-based Focus On The Global South, in a report for the 'Rio Plus Five' conference on the environment that ended Wednesday in

Brazil, said free trade conflicts with long-term environmental concerns.

"The rapid industrialisation of the Asia-Pacific region has produced an environmental situation that can only be described as bordering on crisis," said the report written by Walden Bello and Nicola Bullard of Focus.

Yet the governments of 18 Asia-Pacific economies are pursuing efforts to institutionalise free trade within the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum.

Formed in 1989, APEC spans North and Latin America to South-east Asia and Pacific and aims to tear down all barriers to trade and investment by the year 2020.

Its members are Australia, China, Japan, South Korea, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, Papua New Guinea, Brunei, Mexico, Chile, the US, Canada, New Zealand, Hong Kong and Taiwan.

APEC was meant to be a loose consultative forum aimed at discussing not only freeing up trade but pursuing technical and development cooperation. But pressures from the industrialised economies are pushing APEC to focus more on its free trade goal, despite doubts by developing member economies.

In the process the environment is not getting enough attention, despite rhetoric among APEC members about integrating "sustainable development" concerns in their discussions, said the report called 'APEC And The Environment: A Report To The Rio +Five Conference'.

Focus concludes that APEC is an unlikely vehicle for nature-friendly growth, or for reconciling its aims of freer trade and investment with environmental protection..

"The body's (APEC) commitment to preserving the environment in the Asia-Pacific is largely rhetorical and has not been backed up by

effective programmes," it said.

Most of East Asia's tiger economies have paid a high price for their industrialisation in the last three decades, making their cities extreme health hazards.

South Korea's industrialisation is largely responsible for filthy air in Seoul, which has one of the world's highest sulphur dioxide levels.

Focus cited studies showing that cancer rates have doubled in Taiwan since 1960 and that children in Bangkok have among the highest levels of lead in blood due to air pollution.

A large number of Asia's rivers are degraded or dead, even as its capitals race to build the highest skyscrapers and the biggest shopping malls. In China, up to 30 percent of the agricultural land are degraded, lost to erosion or converted into urban real estate since the 1950s.

Deforestation remains a concern in many South-east Asian countries, and this year's 'State of the World's Forests' report says tropical Asia-Oceania still has the highest rates for forest loss at nearly one percent a year.

And as Asia strives to catch with the industrialised economies of the world, it is also producing more greenhouse gases. The region's carbon dioxide emissions are expected to rise from the current 25 percent of global production to 36 percent by 2025.

Some of these concerns--from the liveability of cities to the state of the marine environment--were discussed in meetings leading up the 1996 APEC summit in the Philippines and endorsed by President Fidel Ramos, who was APEC chair last year.

At one point, Ramos said: "We finally stand on the threshold of unprecedented growth and change. That threshold--unless we watch our

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