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United Nations Under-Secretary General, UNEP  
Herrn Executive Director Achim Steiner  
Box 47074 - Nairobi 00100 – Kenya  
Via email: Corli.Pretorius@unep.org

Karlsruhe, 04.05.2011

Dear Mr. Executive Director Steiner,

I have been informed of Korea's river development plan, which is said to have been benefited by UNEP's positive appraisal. The press release by the Korean government dated August 25, 2009 in fact indicates that you specifically praised the project and rated it as exemplary (see the quotation marked in blue from Appendix 1):

*"The 4 Rivers Revitalization Program has to be viewed as the core of green growth and the Green New Deal. The 4 Rivers Revitalization Program would resolve the problem of water scarcity and would be a measure to flexibly react against climate change with the expected droughts and floods. [...] The 4 Rivers Revitalization Program would not only serve the preservation of ecology but would be also an effective measure to counteract the progressing climate change."*

Another government press release quotes you as follows (see the quotation marked in blue from Appendix 2):

*"Steiner: The 4 Rivers Revitalization Project is a project for which great investments are necessary. For this reason it is imperative to conduct a qualitative assessment, which is already taking place at the moment. The 4 Rivers Revitalization Project is a kind of economic stimulus package and will therefore stimulate the economy, once the project begins."*

Presumably, UNEP drew this conclusion on the basis of the documents and data provided by the Korean government. Such information provided prior to the start of the construction indeed seemed to suggest a very interesting approach.

Considering that we had a personal contact when you were active for the *World Commission on Dams*, more specifically at the conference in Prague, where your commitment and analyses greatly impressed me, I find it difficult to believe that you would still commend the developments that have taken place in Korea ever since, especially in light of your own recommendation that *"it is imperative to conduct a qualitative assessment"* and one of the goals of UNEP's Global Green New Deal is: *"2) Reduce carbon dependency and ecosystem degradation, putting economies on a path to clean and stable development"*, UNEP-Report Policy Brief, March 2010, page 5; see also Edward Barbier's paper for UNEP, April 2009.

As the qualitative assessment you have recommended does not exist and the interventions into the ecosystem can only be described as deeply intrusive, your new appraisal of the project would be quite different: This is not what UNEP had in mind!

It is incomprehensible and scientifically untenable how the 4 Rivers Project would in any way serve to preserve ecosystems and work against climate change. This point of view is shared by internationally renowned colleagues and many dedicated people in Korea, e.g., an organization of several thousand professors.

Trying to sell this "4 Rivers Project" as a "river restoration" project fatally reminds us of the flawed argument in favor of one-sided river engineering measures of the past, before the negative experiences and the subsequent protests forced people to rethink. I perceive "river restoration" as something completely different, namely measures leading to the restoration of the free flowing waters, and not to the rearrangement of the rivers with a cascade of dams, which inevitably leads to the destruction of the precious riverscape.

This project can possibly be seen merely as a massive supportive measure for the construction industry with grave and unpredictable consequences for the natural environment and is frankly irresponsible from a river engineering and river ecology perspective. An immediate stop to the construction would be the only appropriate conclusion, followed by a thorough analysis on how the work could be continued in order to avoid even bigger environmental damages.

For further information concerning the evaluation of the river construction measures by expert colleagues, I would like to direct you to two publications in the appendices(see articles by D. Normile und A. Reif).

The work is already well advanced and interferences are already so grave that only an immediate building freeze could prevent further harm. According to the assessment of the colleagues in Korea, only an authoritative opinion on your part could help at this juncture, since the government refuses to discuss the issue, on the grounds of the positive evaluation made by UNEP.

Do you see any possibility to initiate a dialogue, so that a delegation of respected domestic and foreign specialists can be invited to a serious hearing by the project administrator? I would be very much obliged if you could act as a mediator in the interest of the conservation of the ecological quality of the Korean rivers, or should the advice of so many concerned specialists remain unheard?

Yours sincerely,

H. H. Bernhart

Appendices:

- 2 Articles taken from the Website of the Korean government dated 25. August 2009;  
Translations by *Hea-Jee Im, Munich*; 6 pages.

- Article from Dennis Normile, *Science*, 26. March 2010.

<http://www.sciencemag.org/content/327/5973/1568.short>

- Article from Albert Reif, *Schattenblick*, 9. January 2011.

<http://www.schattenblick.de/infopool/umwelt/internat/uias0048.html>