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BIODIVERSITY:

Fighting for a Green Future

by Haider Rizvi

UNITED NATIONS, Feb 4 (IPS) - At just 13 years old, Felix Finkbeiner may be one of the youngest participants in the two-week U.N. Forum on Forests, but he already has years of environmental activism under his belt.

And he's armed with a business card: "Stop Talking, Start Planting – Felix Finkbeiner, Climate Justice Administrator, UNEP (the U.N. Environment Programme) Junior Board 2008-2010 Children Council."

The teenaged environmental celebrity from Germany has motivated thousands of children around the world to take part in global initiatives against deforestation.

"We will plant more trees. We will fight for our future," Finkbeiner told IPS after the launch of the Year of Biodiversity of Forests 2011 Monday. He has coauthored a book, "Tree for Tree – We children save the world now" is now engaged in efforts to involve one million kids to plant new trees by 2020.

The Forum, which is the only global body for comprehensive deliberations on international forest policy, is focusing on issues related to forest use, land tenure, the role of native communities and other social and cultural aspects of forests.

Before attending the current session, Finkbeiner participated in several international gatherings where he delivered speeches explaining why students should be concerned about deforestation, considered one of the major factors responsible for climatic changes and rapid loss of species.

Finkbeiner first became active in the environmental movement at the age of seven, inspired by giants like Noble Peace Prize Winner Wangari Maathai.

Maathai, who founded Green Belt tree-planting movement in Kenya, was also present at the launch of the Forest Year 2011 in New York. At a news conference earlier this week, she noted that the values of forests and its services to human-kind were often "taken for granted".

"[They are] seen as resources that are unlimited," Maathai said. "But we all know now that we are facing situations where these forests are disappearing."

Forests cover about 31 percent of the world's total land area. More than half of that area is located in just five countries: Brazil, China, Canada, Russia, and the United States. Forest biodiversity provides over 5,000 commercial products, including food, medicines, and clothing.

Experts on biological diversity and climate change say the rate of deforestation has slowed somewhat over the past decade, yet each year about 13 million hectares of the world's forests - an area the size of Greece or Nicaragua - are lost or degraded, with disastrous effects on the lives indigenous peoples.

In a report released this week, the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organisation says the forest industry is "responding" to numerous environmental and social concerns by improving sustainability of resource use. But environmental groups that work closely with the forest- dependent communities' dispute that assertion.

"Industrial resource extraction is posing grave threats to the survival of indigenous peoples in the Amazon Basin," said a statement by the California-based Amazon Watch group a day after the launch of the Forest Year 2011. "There are serious moral, legal and financial reasons for corporations to stem the tide of abuse and respect indigenous peoples' rights."

Numerous studies suggest that at the current rate of deforestation, nearly half of the Amazon could be lost or severely degraded by 2020 if commercial interests continued to exploit the region in violation of international rules requiring that they must obtain "prior and informed consent" of the indigenous peoples.

"The oil industry, for one, is in its infancy when it comes to developing and implementing policies to respect indigenous rights," said Amazon Watch's Mitch Anderson. "Although some companies, such as Talisman Energy, are taking cautious steps forward, other companies, such as Chevron, appear to be burying their heads in the sand."

The Amazon rainforest is the world's largest and most bio- diverse tropical region in the world and is considered home to one-third of the Earth's plant and animal species. About 400 distinct indigenous peoples depend on the rainforest.

Released Tuesday, a new Amazon Watch report, entitled "The Right to Decide: The Importance of Respecting Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC)", says that respecting indigenous peoples' rights "is not just a moral imperative, but also a business necessity" for corporations to avoid financial risk, reputational damage, divestment campaigns and operational delays due to social unrest.

Ahmed Djoghlaif, chief of the U.N. biodiversity treaty secretariat, agrees that initiatives to protect forests cannot be carried out effectively without protecting the rights of their "custodians", by which he means the world's 370 million indigenous peoples.

He is calling on U.N. member states to sign the Nagoya protocol to the biological diversity treaty on "access to genetic resources and the fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from their utilisation." He thinks the implementation of the protocol is a must for efforts to save forests.

Though appreciative of U.N. initiatives to protect the world's forests and their inhabitants' rights, indigenous activists remain sceptical about the prospects of any effective implementation of international treaties.

"The problem is they do not understand," said Kai Landow, a native activist from Hawaii, of governments and businesses that violate native peoples' rights. "There is a huge disconnect," he told IPS. "They don't understand that everybody could enjoy those treasures, including them."

"You can live in New York City, but you cannot be unaffected by the reality that exists in some remote place thousands of miles away," he added, alluding to the loss of forests and rapid destruction of the cultures of ancient peoples who have been living there for thousands of years.

For his part, Djoghlaif sees the U.N. biological diversity treaty as the "daughter of Rio who has now grown up" - a reference to the landmark 1992 treaty on environment and development.

(FIN/2011)