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10/13/08 Concetta DeLuco

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Earth Charter U.S. held its Climate Change Community Summit at the University of Tampa on Saturday. Among the participants at the daylong event was keynote speaker Alexander Likhotal, advisor to former Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Gorbachev. Likhotal discussed some solutions to the primary issue of the meeting, climate change.

People from around the world had the opportunity to attend the Earth Charter Summit either physically or electronically via webcast, yet there was only a handful of visitors present at UT's Falk Theatre.

The Earth Charter International was drafted in part by former Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Gorbachev in 2000 based on input from thousands of people and hundreds of organizations with the purpose of developing a global consensus on the principles for a sustainable economy.

In 2001, UT helped launch Earth Charter U.S., a national movement focusing on the same future environmental goals. Likhotal was the first speaker at the meeting on Saturday. He re-emphasized the need to

continue the use of the Earth Charter as a guideline for future economic change.

Likhotal is president and CEO of Green Cross International, an environmental organization founded by Mikhail Gorbachev in 1993. Today, one of the most important environmental issues, which is also considered one of the biggest threats to our society, is climate change, Likhotal said.

In light of the current global financial crisis, Likhotal said it is easy to focus on trying to solve the economic problems, but if we ignore the issue of climate change, the results will have much more devastating effects on global societies. Already, there have been food and water shortages that have caused otherwise preventable deaths.

Likhotal said, global warming has already affected the most vulnerable communities in the world. The president of Uganda has reported more than 200,000 deaths as a result of the struggle for food and water that has become scarce. Wealthier nations are not immune to the effects of a changing climate. With 3.3 billion people currently living in cities globally, these cities are most at risk in times of environmental disaster, Likhotal said, like what was most recently seen with the hurricane that devastated New Orleans.

The idea that people are dying from contaminated water is ridiculous to Sharon Joy Kleitsch, an audience member at the summit. Yet, she is optimistic about the future and said that the problems caused by climate change can be the answer to our economic situation.

Douglas Bonar, an attendee, said the future looks grim unless action is taken now to change from our current economy to a more sustainable one that benefit's everyone.

The reason the risks of climate change are not more directly addressed is because of the low level of awareness in the communities and government, Likhotal said. With the upcoming presidential elections, global warming is not even an issue on the candidates agenda.

Earth Charter community summits were launched in 2001 in an attempt to popularize the Earth Charter and its mission of a sustainable economy. Since then, more than 12 cities have become involved, new initiatives have been embarked on and endorsements have been received.



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