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New alliance plans to tackle mountains of e-waste

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By Alister Doyle, Environment Correspondent

OSLO (Reuters) - A new U.N.-led alliance will work out global scrapping guidelines to protect the environment from mountains of electronic trash such as computers, phones and televisions, the group said on Tuesday.

Three U.N. agencies, 16 firms including Microsoft, <MSFT.O> Hewlett-Packard <HPQ.N> and Philips <PHG.AS>, several government bodies and universities said they were teaming up with goals such as more recycling and longer lives for electronic goods.

"There's an urgent need to harmonize approaches to electronic waste around the world," said Ruediger Kuehr of the U.N. University, who will head a secretariat of the new StEP (Solving the E-waste Problem) project in Bonn, Germany.

He told Reuters that e-waste -- such as microwave ovens, batteries, photocopiers or hairdryers -- often released toxins if incinerated. Older gadgets contain poisonous chemicals such as dioxins or PCBs or heavy metals such as mercury or cadmium.

Some products contain valuable gold and platinum or more exotic indium <IND-ING-LON>, used in flat-screen televisions, or ruthenium <RUTH-LON>, used in resistors. Prices of indium, for instance, have surged to \$725 a kilo from \$70 in 2002.

Electronic and electrical waste is among the fastest-growing types of trash in the world and is likely soon to reach 40 million metric tons a year, or enough to fill a line of dump trucks stretching half way round the world, StEP said.

StEP would run several projects in coming years, likely to cost millions of dollars, to lay down guidelines for scrapping gadgets, building on national legislation from places such as Japan, the European Union and the United States.

It would encourage companies to make products that last longer and shift to make more products with components that can be upgraded, rather than dumped. The Secretariat, with three full-time staff, will contract out most of the work.

LOGO

In the end, the alliance aims to develop a StEP logo for companies to put on their products to show that scrapping processes conform to international guidelines.

"Consumers will benefit through knowing what to do with their obsolete machines, less pollution and longer-lasting electronic equipment," Hans van Ginkel, the head of the U.N. University, said in a statement.

"Companies involved in StEP will benefit through globally standardized, safe and environmentally-proven processes for disposal, reduction or reuse and recycling of e-scrap," he said.

He said the new guidelines would not push up prices, and product costs could even fall with streamlined global rules.

Many products already include costs of disposal. A 2005 directive in the European Union, for instance, requires electronics makers to set up recycling and disposal systems.

But many countries have no rules, especially in developing nations where much obsolete equipment ends up dumped.

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