

'No war against plastic, but focus on smarter use'



UN Environment Head Says Ban Needed At Times

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Mumbai:

Ahead of World Environment Day, Erik Solheim head of United Nations Environment emphasised that it is not a war against plastics, but the focus is on its “smarter and safer use” with drastic reduction of ‘single use’ plastic. “I want to make very clear that the UN has not declared a war on plastic,” said Solheim a day before his arrival to Mumbai’s Versova beach.

India is the host this year for Global Environment Day. The UN Environment head will be inaugurating programmes with a theme ‘beat plastic pollution’. In an exclusive interview with **TOI**, Solheim said, “Plastic is one of the most useful things ever invented. Plastic makes life better, healthier and safer every day. The problem is how we use it, and where it ends up, where we discard it.”

The state government in March banned manufacture, sale and use of plastic bags, disposable plastic spoons, forks, cups, glasses, containers, PET bottles less than 500 ml and decorative thermocol. Asked if bans were the solution, Solheim said, “In some case we need a ban. But in every case we need innovation.” The answer could be in recycling, he said adding, “What we need is to become smarter in how we use the material. Get the best out of it and prevent the worst... it means a significant cut in the use of single use plastics through better designs and more sustainable alternatives, and better recycling technology and a more circular production cycle.”

“We need to legislate our future away from a plastic planet, we need businesses to change the way they produce, and take responsibility for where their products end up. And we need people to realize that there is no space left on land, or in the seas for plastic that is used for mere seconds.”

“Plastic pollution is something that hardly anyone was talking about two years ago, but it’s now emerged as one of the biggest environmental challenges of our time,” said Solheim in an email response. “To put it in simple terms, we’re drowning in the stuff,” he said. That is the reason the theme this year is ‘beat plastic pollution’.

Solheim said “the throwaway culture” is the problem. “Plastic is in the stomachs of animals. Microplastics are in the water we drink,” he said.

“An Army chief referred to plastic pollution as the biggest enemy we are combating today. That says a lot about this environmental challenge. Last year at the UN Environment Assembly, nearly 200 countries recognized that we are fast becoming a plastic planet, agreeing to address plastic pollution,” said Solheim.