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Freedom

Isn't Free

ATIQ RAHMAN calls for deeper cuts in emissions and greater effort on adaptation to be made urgently to free the world from the imminent threat of dangerous climate change

Runaway climate change is looking ever more threatening. There appears to be just a small window of opportunity in this decade for rapid action to avert catastrophic and irreversible changes.

The good news is that – despite all the misinformation campaigns – the process of climate change negotiation is continuing. Scientific effort, through the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), is narrowing uncertainty and demonstrating the anthropogenic footprint. The Kyoto Protocol has come into force and European countries are trying to implement it. But the bad news is that there are increasing extreme climatic events while global action to reduce greenhouse gases remains very weak, and emissions are increasing more rapidly than ever.

There should be an absolute 5.2 per cent reduction in the greenhouses gas emissions during the Protocol's first commitment period; in fact we have seen a greater increase. And the Kyoto target itself was only designed to be the first, small and inadequate step. It is an absolute priority that the parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change achieve deeper cuts, so as to meet its prime objective: saving the planet from the threat of

runaway climate change. The 12th Conference of the Parties/2nd Meeting of the Parties in Nairobi must strive to achieve them.

Over the last five years there has been an unprecedented increase in extreme weather events in rich, developing and least developed countries alike, including cyclones, floods, heat stress, drought, and the rapid melting of polar ice and glaciers. All countries will need to adapt. Devastating hurricanes like Katrina and Rita have exposed the United States' vulnerability, demonstrating lack of preparedness and the need for adaptation even there; and the adaptation needs of the poorer countries are much greater.

Global climate

The Framework Convention and Protocol enshrine simultaneous actions on mitigation and adaptation. In the final analysis, mitigation is the best form of adaptation, which is certainly no substitute for it. Any delay in reducing emissions will only increase the need and cost of adaptation, and increase the risk of runaway global climate change. The primary responsibility of the Convention and Protocol – and all their member states, signatories and non-signatories – is to reduce emissions now. Industrialized countries must take the lead. Developing countries must also do their utmost, and seek a path of development with lower greenhouse gas emissions.

The delay in the Protocol coming to force has deprived the world of a major opportunity for reversing the course of rapid increase in greenhouse gases. Even its attempt to be a first, small beginning was thwarted by a small group of countries. By contrast, European countries are trying to implement it, but attempts are weak and inadequate. A limited number of Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) projects are emerging. But they are virtually exclusively in the domain of such large developing countries and major ►

emitters as China, India and Brazil. Most of the smaller and poorer nations — and particularly the Least Developed Countries — will largely remain outside its benefits, though they will be the most affected by the adverse impacts of climate change. A special mechanism to include them is essential to make the CDM a universal instrument.

All efforts must be made in include the USA into all future processes. In this rapidly globalizing world it is neither desirable nor helpful to keep the greatest economy out. The US is not only the greatest greenhouse gas emitter; it also can play a key role in solving the problem of climate change with its scientific and financial capabilities. If the US Administration is serious about freedom across the world, then freedom from the increasing threat of climate change — particularly for the poor and vulnerable countries and communities — must be part of the equation.

Climate sceptics

While mitigation efforts have stumbled, there has been some progress over adaptation, maybe as a result of their very failure. This also serves as a rebuff to climate skeptics, emphasizing not only that climate change is real and already here, but that communities and ecosystems need to be protected from its potential threats. Much of this is due to interest from developing countries who have identified that adaptation has direct and reinforcing relationship to sustainable development. Many have led and initiated important advances. The 48 nations of the Least Developed Countries, for example, have started National Adaptation Plans of Action: several industrialized countries, such as Finland and the United Kingdom, have initiated similar plans and activities. Adaptation has to be focused to development. It will be supported, and become cost-effective, if done with sensitivity and respect for local and national circumstances.

The Convention's objective is "stabilization of the greenhouse gas concentration in the atmosphere at a level that will prevent dangerous

anthropogenic intervention with the climate system". But what is "dangerous" remains both controversial, and a scientific challenge, and must be resolved politically. Present concentrations of greenhouse gases are already leading to heat stress, extreme weather events, the melting of polar ice, and the shifting of glaciers and permafrost.

So have we reached dangerous levels? A global and urgent political consensus on this is essential, but so far there is none. The European Union is moving towards a 2°Celsius increase as the limit of acceptability, yet that may still have intolerable impacts. In the absence of consensus, this must be seen as the absolute upper limit, with a view to reducing it.

In the final analysis, this is an issue of consumption, production and environmental justice. Agreeing the Convention was principally a process of governmental North-South negotiations. But civil society — environmental, research, scientific, and business groups — has influenced governments to decide in favour of the planet above narrow national or group interests. The principle of "common but differentiated responsibility" was accepted by all parties and actors.

The 2006 Conference of the Parties should be a fertile ground for discussing the second commitment period, bringing deeper cuts in the North and more decarbonized economic development in the South. Initiatives and discourses on a post-

Kyoto architecture, with various positions on equity, fairness and allocation of responsibility and burden sharing have already been initiated by different groups in both the North and the South. The more progressive ones, such as the "South-North Dialogue on Equity in the Greenhouse, a proposal for an adequate global climate agreement", have combined researchers and institutes from both.

Development needs

The present structure of North-South negotiation may need to be revisited. But any future architecture must include all nations, and particularly the USA, the greatest emitter. It must take into consideration the need, and the right, of poor countries and communities to survive with their development needs met and minimum dignity ensured.

Freedom from the threat of climate change is one of the key freedoms for which every country will have to take responsibility. If it is not ensured, other freedoms — such as from hunger, injustice, terrorism, and dictatorship — could be equally threatened. There is no part of the planet so isolated and fortified that it is free from the danger. Climate security has to be for the entire planet, and all its citizens ■

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