

Intense climate negotiations at Copenhagen

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The UNFCCC will conduct its 15th Conference of Parties from December 7-18 in Copenhagen. This summit will be the most important gathering of world leaders in history where they will discuss ways and means to combating climate challenge. It is reported that 192 country representatives including over 60 world leaders will gather at Copenhagen to engage in climate negotiations to explore the possibilities of sealing a practical and viable deal acceptable to all.

It all started way back in 1990 with the launch of the First Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) which predicted the threat posed by climate change. Most countries have now signed the international climate treaty, called the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) which was established in 1992. Since then, three other Assessment Reports have been published by the IPCC in 1995, 2001 and 2007 respectively. The Kyoto Protocol to the UNFCCC, which is an agreement that established legally binding commitments to reduce carbon emissions formulated in 1997, was considered as a major breakthrough in climate change negotiations. Under Kyoto, only the rich countries had to undertake mitigation commitments by reducing their emission levels on average to 5% below their 1990 level. This was supposed to be achieved by the rich countries during the first commitment period 2008-2012.

The Fourth Assessment Report of the IPCC in 2007 however revealed that the Kyoto Protocol binding targets were not adequate to avoid a Climate Catastrophe. Since then the discussion has been on reaching the global carbon emissions peak by 2015 and reducing the global average to 50% by the year 2050. This target can only be achieved with stronger action on mitigation by all countries: The developing world with a target of 80% and the developed world with a target of 30% against 1990 level by 2050. Further, the developed world should reach a 40% reduction target by 2020.

In the run-up to COP 15 in 2009, there were several formal negotiating sessions under the UNFCCC. These are in March and June in Bonn, September in Bangkok and November in Barcelona. Thus there were almost nonstop negotiations by all parties to the UNFCCC over the months leading to the COP. There are other high-level meetings where the UNFCCC process was discussed. These include the G 20 in April, the G 8 along with a number of emerging economies meeting in Italy in June and various bilateral meetings. The UN Secretary-General used the Annual General Meeting of UN to convey a strong message on climate change before Copenhagen. In November, the leaders of the 53 Commonwealth countries who represent about a third of the world's population, called for a legally binding international agreement on climate change and a global fund with billions of dollars to help poor countries meet their mandates. Overall therefore, of all global matters, climate change policy was the key issue in 2009.

The status at beginning of the Copenhagen summit

The per capita carbon emissions of United States, is the Fifth in the world and it is the world's second-biggest Carbon emitter with 15.5% of global emissions. President Barack Obama will participate at the Copenhagen summit with a strong statement: "We understand the gravity of the climate threat. We are determined to act. And we will meet our responsibility to future generations." The declared emission cut by Obama is 17% below 2005 levels by 2020 pending congressional approval. The climate bill is however, currently bogged down in Senate. Even though he commits to this verbally, it should be noted

that it is just 04% below 1990 levels and it is nowhere near the recommended 40% level. Canada which was with the US under the Umbrella Group has announced that it plans to cut greenhouse gases by 20 percent by 2020 from 2006 levels, which is only slightly tougher than measures announced by the U.S.

The EU is a grouping of 27 European states contributing to 11.8% of global emissions, which is the world's third-biggest GHG producer. The EU declared that they will cut emissions by 20% from 1990 levels by 2020 or 30% if other big emitters take tough action. The EU further agrees that they need to make a 80-95% cut by 2050. Japan is the world's seventh-biggest GHG producer with 3.3% of global emissions and its emission per head is the 15th in the world. Japan has announced that it will cut emissions to 25% below 1990 levels by 2020, if other countries show similar commitment. Japanese industry however has opposed this move of the government.

The world's biggest GHG producer China is responsible for 20.7% of global emissions. Emission per head in China is 30th in the world. China declared that it will set a "binding goal" to reduce its "carbon intensity" by 40-45% by the year 2020, compared with 2005 levels. Carbon intensity, China's preferred measurement, is the amount of carbon dioxide emitted for each unit of GDP. It does not mean China's overall levels of carbon dioxide will start falling however and they will continue to grow as its economy expands. We should not forget that its economy is still growing and is mostly fuelled by polluting coal. The positive point in this statement is that with this binding emissions goal would put China on a path to reduce all its greenhouse gas emissions by about 13 percent from "business as usual". It will be at least a couple of decades before China's emissions peak, so it is likely to remain the largest polluter for some time to come.

India is the world's sixth-biggest GHG producer and contributes to 5% of global emissions. In India climate change is not regarded as a national priority as its emissions per head is 66th in the world. The Chinese move is expected to put pressure on India, which has failed to put forward any numbers for curbing emissions growth. The Press Trust of India reported that India also may accept a carbon intensity target, but not as steep as China's.

The African Union is a grouping of 52 African states and accounts for 8.1% of global emissions. Like all the other countries in the south, it wants rich countries legally bound to cut emissions to 40% below 1990 level by 2020 and describes 20 to 30% cuts as "unacceptable". The African Union is threatening to walk out if demands are not met.

Gulf States account for 2.3% of global emissions and its emissions per head is higher than the US. Although the Gulf States signed Kyoto, as developing countries, they are not obliged to cut emissions. They claim that they are among the most economically vulnerable countries and are seeking financial aid for oil-producers if new agreements require cuts of fossil fuels.

Small islands Nations are organized as the Alliance of Small Island States (Aosis) which is a bloc of 42 island and coastal states mostly in the Pacific and Caribbean. Aosis regard rising sea level as a threat to their existence and seek to limit temperature rise to 1.5 degrees above preindustrial levels and want concentration of CO₂ in the atmosphere lowered from 387 to 350 parts per million. The small island states want global emissions to peak by 2015 and fall 85% below 1990 level by 2050. The Maldives, a Small Island State has already declared that it will be carbon neutral by 2020 setting an example for the rest of the world.

Issues to be discussed at the Copenhagen climate talks

The key issues to be discussed at Copenhagen are how much mitigation needs to be done globally, which countries need to do it and how much mitigation and adaptation will cost developing countries. It is now clear that emission levels agreed by developed countries in the first commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol were inadequate. These countries need to take on much more stringent emission reduction targets in future. It is also clear that major developing countries such as Brazil, China and India, which did not have to take on any emissions reduction targets under that first commitment period, also need to take some action to reduce their projected emissions over time. This will by far be the most difficult part of the negotiations.

Adaptation by all countries and support for adaptation in the poorer and more vulnerable countries from richer countries is one of the issues currently under discussion. Further technology transfer and innovative finance for mitigation and adaptation from rich countries is also discussed. For poor and vulnerable communities, particularly in the developing world, this is a central reality of daily life: many of them are already facing emerging challenges and have to adapt to rising sea levels, shifting patterns of rainfall and other climate impact.

The fact that over 60 world leaders are participating at the Copenhagen summit means that the world is now agreed on one thing; the Climate catastrophe is a serious issue to be resolved by all of humankind. One other thing is also clear; at the current rate of progress humankind cannot avoid a climate catastrophe. Both civil society and the government of Sri Lanka missed a golden opportunity to use the Copenhagen summit to educate the general public on the issue. As Sri Lanka has failed to do so there will be a race among the political parties during first quarter of 2010 to formulate the highest carbon emitting plan for the country in the name of development. This will happen during the upcoming two elections: The Presidential and General Elections to grab as many votes as possible for the respective parties.

Sri Lanka has not yet stated that the President of Sri Lanka will be attending the Copenhagen summit. It is unlikely that the President will attend the summit as the Presidential Elections will be held next month. As the Cabinet of Ministers recently decided to not go ahead with a third Coal power plant beyond 1400 MW there is an opportunity to officially declare it at the summit to get the attention of the international community. Failing to do so, Sri Lanka will become a mere observer at the summit staying behind the popular 'right to pollute' slogan of the south.