

Tough second week ahead for UN climate talks

Bonn, 7 June (Martin Khor)* – The past week saw the resumption of global climate talks in Bonn, with developed countries trying to evade their responsibilities while pushing the burden onto developing countries.

At this half way mark, with another week to go, there is some good news. The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) has re-established itself as the venue for negotiating an international deal on climate change.

The scars of the bruising and chaotic concluding days of the Copenhagen Conference are still there, casting an awkward shadow over the past week's talks, with various countries referring to it in different ways.

But the good news is that all the countries, even those that clashed so strongly at Copenhagen and its aftermath, have been sitting together and talking to one another in a rather friendly way, even if they still disagree.

The reason for this “patching up” of relations is that the Copenhagen Accord that emerged from a side-meeting of some 25-30 political leaders but did not enjoy legitimacy or consensus, has now been integrated into a new “facilitating text” produced by the Chair of the group negotiating “long-term cooperative action” following up on the Bali Action Plan.

The global climate talks are now focusing on this text, with the various options on how to tackle the various issues addressing climate change. Many ideas and items are still missing in the text, and many developing countries have pointed out that it unfairly neglects their proposals and issues, and they have been trying to correct its imbalance.

The not so good news is that the disagreements are still there and may actually have deepened. The

Copenhagen Accord is mainly responsible for this, because it did three things that have weakened the fight against climate change, and which the developing countries by and large are trying to restore.

First, it has embedded within the text a weak “national pledging” system in which developed countries only make voluntary pledges to reduce their emissions, instead of a “top-down approach” in which an overall target is set in line with what science requires (such as a 40% emissions cut by 2020 compared to 1990) and then each country's commitments are agreed on, which all add up to the overall target.

The two opposing approaches are in the text as alternative options, and the countries were last week fighting over which option is preferable.

Second, the critics who predicted that the weak system of pledges would produce weak results were proved correct. Scientists have shown that the pledges made under the Accord were “amazingly unambitious” and in a worst-case scenario could increase the developed countries' emissions by 6.5% by 2020 compared to 1990 or in the best scenario (which is unlikely to take place) decrease their emission by 15.6%, compared with the needed 25-40% decrease.

The pledges under the Accord have put the world on a suicide course in line with a catastrophic average temperature increase of 3 to 4 degrees Celsius by 2100. This contradicts the Accord's own goal of 2 degrees, while many scientists and countries believe that a limit of 1.5 degrees is required.

Third, the Accord gave impetus to the plan of developed countries to do away with the legally binding Kyoto Protocol under which negotiations are

going on to bind the required and comparable emission-reduction commitments of developed countries (except the United States which is not a member). And to replace it with a new agreement in which they merely voluntarily pledge to do what they can.

In the last week, the negotiators of developing countries (including those whose leaders endorsed the Accord) have been trying to retrieve the situation by strongly arguing in favour of the “top-down” approach of setting an overall target for developed countries, coupled with each country making a comparable commitment, all of which adds up to what the science requires.

The developing countries indicated they are prepared to themselves take mitigation actions to reduce their emissions growth, but that they need the developed countries (that caused most of the problem) to take the lead through deep emissions cuts and through financial and technology transfers to support the developing countries' actions.

The past week saw a new phase in the titanic battle. At the working group on the next commitment period of emissions reduction of the Kyoto Protocol, the developing countries insisted on an overall figure of 40 to 50 per cent by which developed countries must cut their emissions by 2020 (compared to 1990 levels).

But this “top-down” approach itself to get an overall number was resisted by the developed countries (with the possible exception of the European countries) even though they had earlier agreed to this.

The same resistance was seen in the group on long-term cooperation. Here, the US took the lead, supported by Japan, Australia, Russia, Canada, to push for the “bottom-up” system for developed countries to only make voluntary national pledges.

At the same time, they pushed hard that developing countries also make mitigation-actions pledges, which would be subjected to international monitoring, reporting and verification (MRV) if the actions are internationally financed, or to a system of

international consultation and analysis every two years (even if the actions are not financed).

The developed countries have really been on the offensive, pushing hard to turn back the previously agreed commitment to reduce their emissions to the adequate extent that science requires, while pushing equally hard to get developing countries to take on extra obligations beyond what is stated in the Convention or the Bali Action Plan.

The developed countries have also been using the “carrot” of promising funds, but these funds are still paltry, with many unanswered questions as to whether they are “new and additional” or merely a re-packaging of existing aid.

A positive move is that the developing countries' demand that a new fund be set up inside the Convention seems to have moved forward. But the important details of where the fund will be located, how it will be controlled, and the sources and quantum of the funds, are still to be worked out.

On technology transfer, the text on setting up of a “technology mechanism” is very weak, and it is clear the developed countries don't really want to cooperate beyond commercial sales of technology and equipment, but the developing countries are fighting for a technology policy-making body inside the Convention (which most surprisingly does not yet exist, and which even then is being resisted by some developed countries).

All these differences, and more, are being fought over in the wording of a text that the countries are hoping will make some progress before the next meeting of the Conference of the Parties in December in Mexico.

This week, a new Chair's draft will be issued, which will catalyse another round of discussions. The negotiators are eagerly awaiting to see whether their points have been captured, and whether new options and amended language are introduced.+

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