

Spotlight on water rights and on climate talks

Bonn, 2 August (Martin Khor) – The adoption of water as a human right by the UN General Assembly and the issuing of a new report on climate change kept environmental issues in the news last week, while the UN climate talks resume this week. Thus, the environment continues to be in the news spotlight in these weeks.

The General Assembly on 28 July at last recognised the right to safe and clean drinking water and sanitation as a human right essential to the full enjoyment of life and all other human rights.

The resolution was adopted by a vote of 122 countries in favour, none objecting and 42 abstaining.

Introducing the resolution and urging for a “yes” vote, Bolivia's Ambassador, Pablo Solon, said: “I ask all delegations to bear in mind the fact that, according to the 2009 report of the World Health Organization and UNICEF entitled “*Diarrhoea: Why children are still dying and what can be done*,” 24,000 children die in developing countries every day from preventable causes like diarrhea contracted from unclean water.

“That is one child death every three and a half seconds. One, two, three ... As my people say, ‘Now is the time’”.

The General Assembly resolution called on countries and international organisations to offer funds and technology to help developing countries scale up efforts to provide clean, accessible and affordable drinking water and sanitation for all.

It also expressed concern that 884 million people lack access to clean water, 2.6 billion lack proper sanitation and 1.5 million children die each year because of water and sanitation related diseases.

Hopefully the passing of this resolution will lead to international actions and financing also to all governments placing higher priority and resources to getting clean water to the people.

When the UN Declaration of Human Rights was drawn up, water was a notable item left out of the list of human rights. Now the General Assembly has rectified it.

Also on 28 July, fresh evidence of a world facing a climate change crisis emerged from a new authoritative report by leading scientists.

The study provides a lot of new data, since the most cited work, the report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was published in 2007 and based on data years before that date.

The new report should help convince the public that climate change is indeed a serious crisis, and in some ways worse than previously thought.

The public perception on climate change has in some countries been affected by “Climategate”, the leaking of e-mails of some climate scientists in a university in England, which sceptics then used to try to discredit the university scientists as well as the whole of climate science.

The new research was led by the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), with contributions from other institutions including the United Kingdom's Meteorological Office.

The Financial Times reported that Peter Scott of the Meteorological Office said the study made use of 11 indicators of climate change and found each of them was due to the influence of greenhouse gases. Seven of the indicators were rising phenomena, including

temperature over land, sea-surface and marine air; sea levels; ocean heat; and humidity.

The NOAA director Jane Lubchenco said the study found that the world's average temperature rose by 0.56 degrees Celsius in the past 50 years, which had altered the planet. He added that glaciers and sea ice are melting, heavy rainfall is intensifying and heat waves are more common.

The research also found that the first half of this year was the warmest on record. Peter Scott said that this refuted the claims of climate sceptics that global warming had stopped or reached a plateau in the past 10 years.

While "Climategate" was going on as a distraction from what the science says, the earth was continuing to warm, remarked Bob Ward of the Grantham Institute at the London School of Economics.

This new report should give a greater sense of urgency to the global climate talks that resumes this week in Bonn under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Convention (UNFCCC).

Most of this session is expected to focus on a new draft of a paper containing elements of a global deal and prepared by the Chair of the Ad Hoc Working Group on Long Term Cooperative Action under the UNFCCC tasked to follow up on the Bali Action Plan.

It contains sections on issues like mitigation (actions to reduce or avoid emissions), adaptation (actions to adapt to climate change that will take place), financing and technology to developing countries and a "shared vision".

The commitments by developed countries for a second period of greenhouse gas emission cuts are also being negotiated by another group under the Kyoto Protocol.

Unfortunately the atmosphere for the negotiations have been dampened by recent news from Washington that the Democrats have given up trying to push through a comprehensive climate-related bill this year in the United States Senate.

Apparently the mood is such that there just won't be enough Senators willing to vote in favour of a climate bill, not this year at least.

It is thus clear that the US delegation at the climate talks will not be able to credibly maintain its offer to cut its country's emissions. It had previously offered to cut emissions by 17% by 2020 compared to 2005 levels, a figure that is also in the bill adopted by the House of Representatives.

Other Parties such as the European Union and Japan would be reluctant to make firm commitments of their own unless the US joins in.

Despite this setback, the developed countries can be expected to keep the pressure on developing countries to undertake more and more obligations.

But if the US, the biggest polluter historically, cannot make a serious pledge, how will the other countries respond?