



Strange outcome of Cancun climate conference

Cancun, 14 December (Martin Khor*) --The United Nations' Cancun climate conference, which adopted a text early on 11 December had a strange outcome.

It was acclaimed by many for reviving the spirit of multilateralism in the climate change system, because another collapse after the disastrous failure of the Copenhagen talks a year ago would have knocked another hole into the reputation of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Convention (UNFCCC).

Most delegations congratulated one another, for agreeing to a document in Cancun.

But this Cancun text has also been accused of falling far short, or even going backwards, in controlling the Greenhouse Gas emissions that cause climate change.

The Cancun conference suffered an early blow from Japan's announcement that it would never ever agree to making another commitment under the Kyoto Protocol (the first commitment period for emission reductions ends in 2012 and the deadline for the second commitment period to be agreed was 2009 in Copenhagen).

The conference never recovered from that blow. The final text failed to ensure the survival of the protocol, though it sets some terms of reference for continuing the talks on the second commitment period next year.

The Cancun meeting in fact made it more likely for the developed countries to shift from the Kyoto Protocol and its binding regime of emission reduction commitments, to a voluntary system in which each country only makes pledges on how much it will reduce its emissions.

The Cancun text also recognised the emission reduction targets that developed countries listed

under the Copenhagen Accord. But these are overall such poor targets that many scientific reports warn that the developed countries by 2020 may decrease their emissions by only a little or even increase their level. The world is on track for temperature rise of 3 to 5 degrees, which would lead to a catastrophe.

But even as it prepared the ground for the developed countries' "great escape" from their commitments, the Cancun text introduced new disciplines for developing countries.

They are now obliged to put forward their plans and targets for climate mitigation, which are to be compiled with in a document and later in registries.

It is a first step in a plan by developed countries (they have been quite open about it) to get developing countries to put their mitigation targets as commitments in national schedules, similar to the tariff schedules in the World Trade Organisation.

The Cancun text also obliges developing countries to report on their national emissions every two years as well as on their climate actions and the results in terms of emission avoidance.

These reports are to be subjected to a detailed scrutiny by other countries and by international experts. The Cancun text in fact gives a lot of space to the details of these "measuring, reporting and verification" (MRV) procedures as well as "international consultations and analysis" (ICA).

These are all new obligations, and a great deal of time was spent in Cancun by the developed countries (especially the United States) to get the developing countries to agree to the details of MRV and ICA.

Many developing-country officials were increasingly worried in Cancun about how they are going to

implement these new obligations, as a lot of people, skills and money will be needed.

In fact the developing countries made a lot of concessions and sacrifices in Cancun, while the developed countries managed to have their obligations reduced or downgraded.

Cancun may be remembered in future as the place where the UNFCCC's climate regime was changed significantly, with developed countries being treated more and more leniently, reaching a level like that developing countries, while the developing countries are asked to increase their obligations to be more and more like developed countries.

The ground is being prepared for such a new system, which could then replace the Kyoto Protocol. Cancun was a milestone in facilitating this.

The Cancun conference also agreed on establishing a new global climate fund under the UNFCCC to help finance the mitigation and adaptation. A committee will be set up to design various aspects of the fund. No decision was taken on how much money the fund will get.

A technology mechanism was also set up under the UNFCCC, with a policy-making committee, and a centre. However, the Cancun text avoided any mention of intellectual property rights (IPR), which have an influence over developing countries' access to and cost of technology.

The United States had insisted that there be no mention whatsoever of the IPR issue, and it got its way in Cancun.

The Cancun conference was also marked by a questionable method of work, quite similar to the WTO but not used in the United Nations, in which the host country, Mexico, organised meetings in small groups led by itself and a few Ministers which it selected, who discussed texts on the various issues.

The final document was produced not through the usual process of negotiations among delegations, but compiled by the Mexicans as the Chair of the meeting, and given to the delegates for only a few hours to consider, on a take it or leave it basis (no amendments are allowed).

At the final plenary, Bolivia rejected the text, and its Ambassador, Pablo Solon, made a statement giving detailed reasons why. Despite there not being consensus on the text, the Mexican foreign minister declared the text was adopted, to which Bolivia lodged an objection.

The Mexican way of organising the writing and later the adoption of the Cancun text raises a lot of questions about openness and inclusiveness and the future of UN procedures and practices.

The importation of WTO-style methods may in the immediate period lead to the "efficiency" of producing an outcome, but also carries the risk of conferences collapsing in disarray (as has happened in several WTO ministerial meetings) and in biases in the text, that usually have been in favour of developed countries.

When the dust settles after the Cancun conference, a careful analysis will find that its text may have given the multilateral climate system a shot in the arm and positive feelings among most participants because there was something to take home, but that it also failed to save the planet from climate change and helped pass the burden onto developing countries.

From this low base level, much work needs to be done in 2011 to save the world from climate change, and to re-orientate the international system of cooperation to address the climate crisis.

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