

Climate talks resume, amid weather chaos

Doha, 26 November (Martin Khor*) – It's that time of year again when the spotlight falls on climate change.

The annual United Nations Climate Conference opens this week in Doha, Qatar with 15,000 people expected to take part.

Actions are more sorely needed than ever before. The 18th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP 18) meets amidst stark evidence of climate change's damaging effects.

The most publicised recent event is Hurricane Sandy that caused US\$50 billion of devastation in the United States' eastern coast, including the flooding in New York's subway system.

"It's the climate, stupid!" said the cover of Bloomberg Business Week in its pre-election issue. Its writer said that climate change should have been the biggest election issue. Yet, "the issue is missing in action on Congress' calendar and in the presidential debates. After Sandy, that is insane."

It is hoped that American public opinion will change after Sandy. Climate denialists and conservative politicians have prevented the US from making credible emission-reduction commitments in the climate talks. Indeed, the US is the biggest blocker of global action.

It has promoted the voluntary system of pledges, where each country simply states what it wants to do, instead of a top-down approach preferred by most other countries, in which scientific estimates are made on what needs to be done and then each country is assigned to undertake required cuts comparable to one another.

The world is on track for a disastrous rise of 4 degrees Celsius in average temperature, warned a World Bank report last week, far above the 2 degree

C threshold. Even at today's 0.8 degree C (above the pre-industrial level), extreme weather events such as floods, drought and storms are already causing havoc.

Sobering data was provided by the latest UN Environment Programme report on emissions gap. Annual global emissions have shot up from 40 billion tonnes in 2000 to the present 50 billion tonnes and is projected at 58 billion tonnes in 2020 if there is no action.

This needs to be brought down to 44 billion tonnes in 2020, to stay within the 2 degree limit. But even if countries fulfil the best of their emission-reduction pledges, the 2020 level will be 52 billion tonnes.

UNEP estimates the emissions gap to be 8 to 13 billion tonnes by 2020. This is the difference between what should be the emissions level in 2020 and what it is projected to be. It is thus a measure of the extra effort needed to cut emissions.

Unfortunately COP18 in Doha is unlikely to produce a breakthrough. It is supposed to close the work in two working groups (Kyoto Protocol or KP and Long-term cooperative action under the Convention or LCA) and pave the way for work to start in a third group (Durban Platform or DP).

The DP working group can get into real work only if the other two groups finish their work successfully, and this now seems unlikely.

Under the KP group, COP18 should see developed countries finally binding their commitments to reduce emissions by certain percentages for the next 5 or 8 years under the Kyoto Protocol's second period (the first period ends in December 2012).

But there are multiple problems. Canada quit the protocol altogether, just as the US did years ago. Japan, Russia and New Zealand refuse to take part in

this second period, and Australia has not yet made up its mind.

That leaves the European countries. The European Union will only commit to a low number (20% cut by 2020 compared to 1990) and has hinted that instead of this figure being committed in a binding way to be ratified by the Parliaments of its member states, it might propose to do so only through a decision at the COP.

Meanwhile the other developed countries that are not in the Kyoto Protocol are supposed to make a comparable commitment in the LCA group. However the US has led the move to a “pledge” system, in which countries can pledge as they please.

The US is adamant in closing the LCA group (formed in 2007 to negotiate the Bali Action Plan) even though it has not yet finished its work on mitigation, adaptation, finance and technology.

The US dislikes several things about the Bali Action Plan: its provision that all developed countries have to make a comparable effort in mitigation, its recognition of the difference in mitigation obligations between developed and developing countries, and the principle that developing countries’ actions depend on their obtaining funds and technology.

The developing countries want the LCA group to complete its work or else to have its outstanding issues properly transferred (together with the principles and framework underlying these issues) to other bodies, before the group closes down.

But they face resistance from several developed countries, which want to get rid of many key issues put forward by developing countries (such as the effects of intellectual property on technology transfer, and to ensure that climate change is not used as a ground for unilateral trade measures).

These developed countries also want to continue the negotiations on certain issues, especially mitigation, but without the principles or understandings already

agreed to in the Climate Change Convention and in the LCA group.

They hope that if the KP and LCA groups close down, they can get the new DP group to discuss climate actions on a clean slate, with all countries having to take on similar obligations. The differences between developed and developing countries would be erased or minimised.

But this is precisely what the developing countries do not want. For them future negotiations on the actions countries should undertake must be guided by the Convention’s principles of equity which recognises “differentiated responsibilities” between developed and developing countries.

They fear that the developed countries are refusing to live up to their commitments to cut emissions and instead are preparing the ground for passing the burden onto the developing countries.

They are also concerned that the developed countries have not kept their promise to transfer technology. And the new funds to support developing countries are also absent or far below the promised or required levels.

On the other hand, the developed countries want to see the developing countries taking on similar emission-reduction obligations. They fear that otherwise the developing countries will catch up economically, and they will lose their economic dominance.

COP18 will see the continuation of this diplomatic wrangling. The deadlock or at best slow progress in the climate talks is in contrast with the urgency of action needed to combat the rising temperature and the growing number and intensity of extreme weather events.

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