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A "low ambition" outcome in Doha

Geneva, 10 December (Martin Khor*) – The annual UN climate conference concluded in Doha last Saturday (8 December) with "low ambition" both in emission cuts by developed countries and funding for developing countries.

Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) adopted many decisions, including on the Kyoto Protocol's second commitment period in which developed countries committed to cut their emissions of greenhouse gases.

Many delegates left the conference quite relieved that they had reached agreement after days of wrangling over many issues and an anxious last 24 hours that were so contentious that most people felt a collapse was imminent.

The relief was that the multilateral climate change regime has survived yet again, although there are such deep differences and distrust among developed and developing countries.

The conflict in paradigms between these two groups of countries was very evident throughout the two weeks of the Doha negotiations, and it was only papered over superficially in the final hours to avoid an open failure. But the differences will surface again when negotiations resume next year.

Avoidance of collapse was a poor measure of success. In terms of progress towards real actions to tackle the climate change crisis, the Doha conference was another lost opportunity and grossly inadequate.

The conference was held at the end of a year of record extreme events. News of typhoon in the Philippines which killed 500 and made 300,000 homeless reminded the conference participants of the reality of the climate crisis.

However, the dictates of economic competition and commercial interests unfortunately were of higher priority, especially among developed countries, which explains their low ambition in emission reduction. They also broke their promises in the legally binding UNFCCC to provide funds and transfer technology to developing countries.

The most important result in Doha was the formal adoption of the Kyoto Protocol's second commitment period (2013 to 2020) to follow immediately after the first period expires on 31 December 2012.

However, the elements are weak. With original Kyoto Protocol Parties Russia, Japan and New Zealand having decided not to join in a second commitment period, and and Canada have left the Protocol altogether, only Europe, Norway, Switzerland, Australia, and a few others (totalling 35 developed countries and countries with economies in transition) are left to make legally binding commitments in the second period.

Also, the emission cuts these countries agreed to commit to are in aggregate only 18% by 2020 below the 1990 level, compared to the 25-40% required to restrict global temperature rise to 2 degrees Celsius.

A saving factor in the Kyoto Protocol decision is the "ambition mechanism" put in by developing countries, that the countries will "revisit" their original target and increase their commitments by 2014, in line with the aggregate 25-40% reduction goal.

Also, the decision severely limited the amount of credits or surplus allowances that can be used during the second period. These credits were accumulated in the Kyoto Protocol's first commitment period by countries that cut their emissions more than the targeted level.

According to the decision, these countries cannot use or trade most of the surplus allowances as a means to avoid current emission cuts.

The most important country affected is Russia, and on Saturday it strongly objected to the way the President of the Conference, Abdullah Hamad al-

Attiyah of Qatar, bulldozed through the Kyoto Protocol decision even though it and two other countries tried to object.

A second major criticism of the Doha decisions is the lack of funds to be provided to developing countries to take climate actions.

In 2010, the Conference of Parties in Cancun decided that developed countries would mobilise climate finance of US$100 billion a year starting in 2020; and that US$30 billion of fast track finance would be given in 2010-2012.

But there is a gap between 2013 and 2020. Despite the demand by developing countries that there be US$60 billion by 2015, the decision adopted on Saturday does not specify any number as a commitment. It only "encourages" countries to provide at least as much as they had in the 2010-2012 period.

The lack of a credible finance commitment led to an outcry by developing countries on the plenary floor. This lack of funds curtails their ability to undertake actions to combat climate change, especially since they have agreed in the 2010 Cancun and 2011 Durban Conferences to take on more mitigation efforts.

The Doha conference also adopted a set of decisions under its working group on long-term cooperative action under the UNFCCC. The developing countries were pleased with paragraphs on equity, unilateral trade measures, technology assessment and a vague reference to the effects of intellectual property.

However these decisions were very weak. Even then the United States registered its disagreement or reservations to these decisions, after the adoption of the text, giving a foretaste of how they will continue to object to future discussions on these issues.

A positive decision made in Doha was to prepare for the setting up by next year's Conference of an "international mechanism" to help developing countries deal with loss and damage caused by climate change. This also resulted from intense negotiations.

Activities meanwhile will include an expert meeting and preparing technical papers on this issue. Developing countries hope that this programme will lead to new funds being channelled to those countries suffering from flooding, drought, sea level rise and other forms of damage linked to climate change.

The Doha conference also adopted a work plan for the new working group on the Durban Platform that was set up in December 2011. There were major fights in Doha over this, with many developing countries insisting that mention be made that the Durban Platform will operate on the basis of equity and common and differentiated responsibilities (CBDR), the operating principle of the UNFCCC.

The final text did not mention this principle, and even the reference to the June 2012 Rio Plus 20 Summit which endorsed the equity and CBDR principle was removed at the insistence of the United States.

What remained in the text was a reference that the Durban Platform's work will be guided by the principles of the Convention. Even then, the United States in the final plenary placed a reservation that they reject the use of this phrase in the negotiations in the Durban Platform group.

This reveals how much lacking in the spirit of international cooperation that the United States and some other developed countries have become.

They are no longer willing to assist the developing countries, and incredibly are even objecting to the principles of the Convention being applied to negotiations to set up a new agreement that will be under the Convention.

More than anything else, this shows the tragic paradox of the Doha conference. It succeeded in adopting many decisions and kept the functioning of the multilateral climate regime alive, but the actual substance of actions to save the planet from climate change was absent, as was a genuine commitment to support the developing countries.

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