

Conflict deepens before Copenhagen

Geneva, 9 Nov (Martin Khor) --The United Nations climate talks in Barcelona last week ended disappointingly as there was little progress on the key political issues, and a few dramatic events showed the depth of the impasse. It was the last negotiation session before the Copenhagen conference in December, and it lost the last chance to close the gaps on the many issues still outstanding.

But it was not all doom and gloom. There was some advance in clarifying some issues, for example, some new texts were discussed in finance and technology issues. The Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) did not bridge the differences, but the Barcelona meeting helped countries to better clarify their positions and thus enabled decisions on key issues to be made in Copenhagen. These include the setting up of a Fund directly under the UNFCCC, and whether to set up a new executive body to decide on technology transfer issues also within the UNFCCC. However, differences on some key issues remained and in some cases deepened, which is not a positive sign for Copenhagen.

First is the future of the Kyoto Protocol, a treaty under the UNFCCC that spells out the legally binding greenhouse gas emission reduction targets for developed country Parties. What was signaled in Bangkok in early October was confirmed in Barcelona, that almost all the developed countries have decided to abandon the Protocol. They apparently want to establish a new agreement, which is likely to be a climb down from the internationally legally binding regime of the Kyoto Protocol, to a collection of national efforts and peer review of performance, in the new agreement. The developing countries made clear in Barcelona that they would not accept this climb-down and that the developed countries have to make clear they will remain in KP and seriously negotiate in Copenhagen a second commitment period (that starts in 2013) for further emission reduction.

Second is the very low level of ambition of developed countries in emission reduction. Developing countries have called for an aggregate cut of at least 40% by 2020 compared to 1990. The latest figures revealed at Barcelona showed that the national announcements amount to only 16-23% (excluding the US, UNFCCC Secretariat data) and 11-17% (including the US, according to an estimate of the Alliance of Small Island States). The developing countries are aghast at such low levels of commitments, which do not form a basis for an environmentally ambitious outcome in Copenhagen, as required by scientific assessments.

Third is the continued attempt to shift the burden of responsibility to developing countries, in violation of the principles and provisions of the UNFCCC and the Bali Action Plan adopted by the Parties in 2007. Developed countries at the Barcelona session proposed to blur the distinction between the differentiated responsibilities of developed countries (mitigation commitments that are legally binding) and developing countries (mitigation actions enabled and supported by finance and technology). The attempt included getting developing countries to adhere to new and broad reporting and verification procedures similar to developed countries, to get some ³advanced developing countries² to adhere to emission reduction targets, and to get developing countries in general to have emissions subject to ³deviation from business as usual by 15 to 30 percent². These were not agreed to in Bali nor are they in the UNFCCC provisions. What is ³business as usual² is also not determined.

Fourth, the adequate means to enable developing countries to take actions are still not forthcoming. On finance, the developed countries have yet as a group to respond to the finance proposals of the developing countries that range from 1 to 5 percent of GNP. The European Union's recent announcement of a willingness to consider Euro 22 to 50 billion by 2020 of international public finance is inadequate, and more details are needed on this as well as Europe's own share. On technology transfer, there is a reluctance of developed countries to agree to setting up an executive body under the UNFCCC to decide on technology issues and to effect technology transfer. An advisory group as they propose is not good enough, especially since there has been very little tech-transfer achieved under the UNFCCC for the past decade and half.

Fifth, there is a difference over the ³shared vision² and a long-term global goal for emissions reduction. Some developed countries confirmed their proposal for a global 50% emissions cut by 2050 compared to 1990, and a 80% cut for themselves. However what was unstated is that this requires developing countries to also cut by 20% in absolute terms and 60% in per capita terms. Some developing countries would have to cut by significantly more than 60% from the 2009 level. Thus the ³burden² in percentage terms for both developed and developing countries is almost the same. Yet the massive finance and technology transfer that may enable developing countries to take on a part of this challenge is not forthcoming. The figures have to be discussed more, the developed countries have to undertake ³negative emissions² (achieve net emissions reduction, below zero, considering that they have used more than their fair share of the atmospheric space for their own growth), and the finance and technology issues have to be resolved beforehand.

The above are some of the issues that have to be resolved if Copenhagen is to be a success. Whatever is the nature or form of the outcome (whether a full deal or a framework of a deal, or a decision to continue the talks), the aspects of environment, equity and North-South balance have to be taken care of.

At the closing plenary in Barcelona, China's delegation chief, Su Wei, gave a direct message. ³To those developed countries who are standing there waiting for developing countries to act, please look ahead,² he said. ³We, the developing countries, have already left you behind, you cannot use developing countries as an excuse for your inaction any more. ³Please wake up and to see that Copenhagen is just miles away, you have to get running in order catch up. Otherwise, you will fail in the race to Copenhagen and beyond.² India's special envoy on climate change, Shyam Saran, rejected attempts to already declare failure at Barcelona and downgrade expectations from Copenhagen. ³To talk about a political agreement instead of a legally binding outcome, to suggest that we may be able to achieve some result only by the end of 2010, these are prophecies which we must dismiss,² he said.

The warnings from the two largest developing countries indicate that the Copenhagen conference will see a major battle, unless informal meetings and talks among some countries help to bridge the gaps.+

(Martin Khor is Executive Director of the South Centre, which is based in Geneva).