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'Urgency' theme of global Catholic climate delegation

by Michael Humphrey



Splinters of ice peel off from one of the sides of the Perito Moreno glacier during the Southern Hemisphere's winter months in early July 2008 near El Calafate, Argentina (CNS photo)

NEW YORK

When President Barack Obama addresses the United Nations Summit on Climate Change on Sept. 22, an environmental delegation led by Catholic bishops from Europe, Africa and Latin America will not be listening for his soaring rhetoric or refreshing good will. They want to hear numbers.

“We want to hear him say the United States is committed to a 40 percent reduction in emissions by 2020,” says Bernd Nilles, secretary general of CIDSE, an international alliance of Catholic development agencies that coordinated the delegation along with Caritas Internationalis. “And an 80 percent decrease by 2050, which he has already stated as his goal. But a 40 percent reduction in the near term would protect human lives. We in the developed world have an obligation to do that.”

Saving lives now, especially in poor southern climates, is the key message of the delegation, officially headed by Cardinal Keith O’Brien, archbishop of St. Andrews and Edinburgh. Bishops from Nigeria, Bangladesh and Guatemala have scheduled meetings with leaders from around the world. The delegation

also includes climate experts from India, Bolivia, Brazil and Kenya and is rounded out by members of CIDSE and Caritas Internationalis, the largest network of Catholic charities in the world.

"This is first a delegation bringing a message about moral responsibility," Nilles says, "and when they ask about science, we will respond with science. When they ask about economic issues, we will respond with those answers."

The pressure to do something on the international level is high — the deadline for a new climate change agreement amongst UN nations is this December when negotiators will be in Copenhagen, Denmark. This week's high-profile meeting in New York is the last major gathering before that deadline. But U.N. deadlines are not the only cause for urgency.

"We are already clearly seeing the effects of climate change on the poorest people in India," says Nafisa D'Souza, a delegation member and southern climate expert from Visakapatnam, India. "It is affecting the sea levels, which is hurting fishing villages; it is affecting rain levels, which is hurting the country's food security and it's affecting the forests, which is an important part of habitation in India."

The obvious result is geopolitical turmoil, D'Souza says.

"All of the problems, droughts, storms, deforestation, rising sea levels," D'Souza says, "these all lead to migration to the urban areas."

In the second most populous country in the world, the exodus of millions of people to already bursting cities will intensify abject poverty. When refugees begin to cross borders and disputes between nations over water supplies increase — regional wars loom.

"This will not be only a southern problem," D'Souza says. "It will affect everybody eventually."

D'Souza says she realizes much of the climate talk in the U.S. concentrates on the distant future. She also hears plenty about China and India's growing culpability, by virtue of more people gaining access to very basic energy sources. She says these deflections miss the larger point.

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"The point is that lifestyles must be changed, both in the north as well as the south," she says, "sooner rather than later."

Humphrey is a free lance writer and frequent contributor to NCR, living in New York.

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