

Conflict surfaces early at climate conference

Dennis Sadowski | Catholic News Service | Dec. 8, 2009

WASHINGTON -- The underlying tension between the world's largest producers of greenhouse gases and small countries quickly surfaced on the first day of the U.N. conference on climate change in Copenhagen, Denmark.

In smaller gatherings after Danish Prime Minister Lars Lokke Rasmussen opened the conference with the remark that "a deal is within our reach," the Alliance of Small Island States said it would accept nothing less than a legally binding pact to limit greenhouse gases. A much less demanding but politically appealing agreement would do little to protect its countries from rising sea levels, said the alliance, a coalition of 42 small island nations, low-lying coastal countries and territories.

Two officials from the U.S.-based Maryknoll Office of Global Concerns said the position taken by the alliance serves as a call to the world to ensure that developed countries take definitive steps to significantly reduce their greenhouse gas emissions.

"The real debate is over a political versus a legally binding document," Maryknoll Sister Ann Braudis, who co-chairs the U.N. NGO Committee on Sustainable Development, told Catholic News Service in an e-mail.

She said the United States, during an afternoon news conference, promised to seek meaningful reductions in greenhouse gas emissions while working to make the expected political agreement a legally binding one.

The same day, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency announced it had determined greenhouse gases are endangering people's lives and must be regulated. The announcement was timed to send a message to the U.N. conference that the White House was ready to act on global warming even without congressional action.

Braudis's Washington-based colleague, Kathy McNeely, told CNS in a telephone interview that the broad network of faith-based nongovernmental organizations on hand in Copenhagen, including Caritas Internationalis and the Catholic International Cooperation for Development and Solidarity, are taking the opportunity to press the need for a legally binding climate agreement because the future of the world's poorest nations is at stake.

"Our message is a moral message," McNeely said. "The United States has very smart people negotiating for them as do some of the other countries of the North, and they should be able to figure out how to best protect the most vulnerable countries."

More than 100 world leaders were expected at the two-week summit, driving hope that a significant deal could be reached to replace the existing U.N. Kyoto Protocol that limits carbon-based emissions. The protocol runs through 2012.

U.S. President Barack Obama was planning to join the conference on its final day, Dec. 18.

Nearly three dozen representatives of Catholic aid and development organizations were in Copenhagen to

deliver a common message: action must be taken immediately to ease the impact of global climate change on poor and vulnerable people because they already are being adversely affected by drought, flooding and rising sea levels brought on in part by the high levels of greenhouse gas emissions from more developed countries.

Before the world gathering, religious leaders offered their prayers and called for responsible actions on behalf of the earth.

Pope Benedict XVI, speaking at his noon blessing at the Vatican Dec. 6, said protection of the environment requires more sober lifestyles and a rediscovery of the "moral dimension" of development.

He also said he hoped the Copenhagen conference would identify policies that "respect creation and promote a cooperative development founded on the dignity of the human person and oriented toward the common good."

"The protection of creation demands the adoption of lifestyles that are sober and responsible, especially toward the poor and future generations," the pope said.

At an ecumenical prayer service in London, Archbishop Vincent Nichols of Westminster said the needs of the world's poorest and most disadvantaged people must be at the center of the worldwide debate on climate change.

The archbishop urged people to consider their own lifestyles when thinking about climate change and called upon people to simplify their lives rather than be dominated by the demands of a consumer society.

Afterward Archbishop Nichols joined other religious leaders, including Anglican Archbishop Rowan Williams of Canterbury, in a march around central London to call attention to climate-change concerns.

Bishop Paul Bui Van Doc of My Tho, Vietnam, urged Catholics in his southern diocese to focus on preserving the natural world. In an Advent letter, he asked people to keep waterways clear of pollution and to conserve energy and water as they go about their daily lives.

Bishop Doc, head of the Vietnamese bishops' doctrinal commission, warned Catholics against damaging the environment for personal gain, reported UCA News, the Asian church news agency. He cited deforestation, the release of toxic waste by local factories and the government-run hydroelectric plants built on rivers in central provinces as causes for concern.

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