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The beginning of the end, and, if so, whose?

by Joan Chittister

From *Where I Stand*

Welcome to Cop15, the UN Conference on Global Warming being held in Copenhagen. Denmark is not easy to forget. In the first place, every school child knows the tales of fearless, seafaring Danes. In the second place, every traveler remembers Copenhagen as the city of \$20.00 hamburgers and \$40.00 seven minute taxi cab fares. Copenhagen is, in fact, the second most expensive city in the world, just slightly less expensive to live in than Oslo. But that will be nothing compared to the price the world pays for this conference.

Without a doubt, the price for all of us will be high if some kind of agreement passes here that limits gas house emissions of fossils fuels in developed countries. The price will even be higher if it doesn't. Worse, the price may well be catastrophic if any kind of agreement passes that limits development for the poorest countries of the world but is simply designed to allow rich countries to get even richer.

The Conference on Climate Change isn't about climate change at all, you see. The overwhelming body of scientists and politicians know that global warming is real, that it threatens rich and poor countries alike, that it is inevitable unless something is done to reverse the process and soon. No, this UN conference on global warming is not about science. It's about money. So, on Friday, the demonstrations started.

The generation that knows that they will be the people left to pick up the bill for the decisions not made here are being carted away in police vans in order to lower the din of the world's cry for equity, for help. So, the generation of young that will not be allowed to make the decision whether to save the planet or reduce it to dust have come to Copenhagen from all over the world. Along with the voices of so many others.

People from island nations, for instance, facing immanent danger from rising water levels in the world

will be the first to have to deal with the effects of dislocation. People in lands going to dust and stone from the dried up river beds around them, will soon be unable to eke out a living in those parts of the world. People sweltering from rising temperatures and shorter growing periods will watch as the Garden of Eden shrivels around them. But as the world fills with ecological refugees, the rest of us will bear the costs of what we do not spend now to avert it, as well.

So, there is a tone of quiet desperation in the city now. And an undercurrent of anger, as well, at the United States, in particular. A young woman addressed a hall full of NGO delegates as UN delegates canceled the second of Plenary sessions of the week in order to flee into private committee meetings together. The disappointment was palpable. "We are now at the point," she said, "where the United States is using multilateralism to get the rest of the world to agree to plans and programs that will simply justify what the United States has already decided to do. And these plans are being made despite their effect on other countries in the world--especially the poorest of the poor."

Instead of plenaries, UN committees worked feverishly to design a solution to the impasse over degrees of emission and amounts of economic support necessary to bring poorer nations the willingness to forego them. If as a human race we are to dissuade another whole body of presently underdeveloped nations from seeking their economic Eden in an economy based on fossil fuels-as we have-some plan for underwriting the energy engines of the economies of the poor while we control our own is imperative.

The young woman was not hopeful about the equity of it all. Nor were all those many in the hall who applauded her analysis.

From where I stand, several strains were clear: Whatever agreements come out of Cop15, enforceability is key. Classism-poor against rich-is a danger. Multilateralism that does not support those nations who stand to be as smothered by the effects of national agreements that deny them economic development as they are by the effects of achieving it through the energy sources of the past will become a major political problem in the future. And, finally, this is only the beginning of a real struggle to resolve it.

And, oh yes, there is one more thing we might want to be aware of as we use our water in unlimited quantities and fuel our over-fueled homes and that is the African voice that answered the young woman's analysis. "The only thing to do," he said, "is to work with a coalition of smaller governments and isolate the United States entirely. That is what we did to stop apartheid. Then, eventually, the United States will have to come along."

Time is running out, they tell us. Maybe we should, for our own sakes, if for nothing else, join the human race now-before it's too late.

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