

UN climate change conference sputters

Sean McDonagh | Dec. 15, 2008

Poznan, Poland

Analysis



As 11,000 attendees left a key United Nations climate change conference on a dark and drizzly day here Dec. 12, most felt let down by the lack of any substantive movement on the climate change agenda. The gloom described the mood change between the Poznan conference and its counterpart in tropical blue Bali, Indonesia a year ago.

Then, many rich countries led by the European Union acknowledged that cuts in greenhouse gas emissions of between 25 and 40 per cent were necessary to keep average global temperatures from rising some 4 degrees Fahrenheit in this century. At Poznan, due to the deep economic recession in Europe and elections in Germany in 2009, the EU pulled back from that commitment.

Also at Bali, it appeared that rich countries, whose prosperity was built on burning fossil fuel, were willing to provide finance, technology and capacity-building to help poor countries reduce greenhouse gas emissions and furthermore assist these countries to adapt to the now unavoidable consequences of climate change.

As 2008 ends, it is clear many poor countries -- such as Peru and Bangladesh -- already suffer from extreme weather events, drought and floods, diminishing access to fresh water due to glacial melt, and the loss of land due to sea-level rise.

Yet UN action on the Adaptation Fund -- to help poor countries to move to a low-carbon economy while meeting their basic needs -- did not progress at Poznan.

Nor was Poznan's negotiating atmosphere helped by the Bush-Obama transition in Washington. The majority of people I spoke to here, including many U.S. citizens, were delighted that U.S. climate change Ambassador Harlan Watson's reign as chief U.S. negotiator was ended, as he and his team had done everything possible to deny the science of climate change.

Since Nairobi in November, 2007, where the United States reluctantly accepted the scientific consensus, Watson had failed to help shape a fair and equitable climate treaty all parties could sign in 2009 in Copenhagen.

One glimmer of hope at Poznan was incoming U.S. President Barack Obama's pledge to tackle climate change; and his heartening appointment of Nobel Prize-winning physicist Steven Chu as Energy Secretary. Chu has

promoted research into alternative energy and is convinced of the urgency of tackling greenhouse gas emissions.

Another is that despite the appalling environmental record of President George W. Bush, significant U.S. initiatives on climate were enacted state governments in California, the Midwest and the Northeast. Further, the incoming president has significant allies in Congress, both House Commerce and Energy chair, Congressman Henry A Waxman, and Senate Environment and Public Works Committee chair Senator Barbara Boxer, have promoted environmental legislation.

Additionally, Al Gore's awareness-raising work makes it easier for the incoming administration to address climate change topic for, as Gore told a packed hall on Poznan's closing day, "Our home, Earth, is in danger. Unless we act quickly we could do irretrievable damage to the planet's habitability for humans."

American conference participant Immaculate Heart of Mary Sister Pat Nagle told me the Obama presidency was "a great moment and opportunity for us to take bold creative (climate change) steps." Her Monroe, Michigan community has already refurbished its motherhouse as completely ecologically-sustainable. She hopes that "the values which we share through our religious and spiritual traditions can energize this movement for sustainable living," through an Obama-era focus on tackling climate change at the parish and diocesan level.

Writer and Columban Father Sean McDonagh follows climate change issues.

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