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Philippine delegate, Catholics add voices to Warsaw climate talks

by Jonathan Luxmoore by Catholic News Service

Eco Catholic

Warsaw, Poland — As government delegates began debating climate change in Warsaw Monday, Catholic representatives have worked to ensure the church's voice is heard.

The Conference of the Parties, running until Nov. 22, will review progress since the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, which committed industrialized countries to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Catholic organizations are present in the Polish capital, too, lobbying for action through parallel discussions.

"Climate change has become a growing concern for church organizations -- it poses ethical challenges, not just scientific and technical ones," said Adriana Opromolla, advocacy officer for Caritas Internationalis, the Vatican-based federation of Catholic charities.

"Delegates in Warsaw should remember their decisions will affect the lives and interests of billions of people. These are issues of justice which should matter to everyone," she said.

The conference's opening session struck an emotional tone, as the lead negotiator of the Philippines made an embattled plea as his country still comes to grips with the destruction and thousands of lives lost from Super Typhoon Haiyan. Yeb Sano, the Philippines climate change commissioner, recounted that a year before at the climate talks in Doha, Qatar, his delegation appealed to the world "to open our eyes to the stark reality that we face" as 2012's Typhoon Bopha became the costliest disaster in the island nation's history.

?With an apparent cruel twist of fate, my country is being tested by this hellstorm called Super Typhoon Haiyan, which has been described by experts as the strongest typhoon that has ever made landfall in the course of recorded human history,? he said, adding that initial assessments showed the storm impacting two-thirds of the population.

?What my country is going through as a result of this extreme climate event is madness. The climate crisis is madness. We can stop this madness. Right here in Warsaw,? Sano stated, as he announced he would fast in solidarity with family and other Filipinos without food ?until a meaningful outcome is in sight.?

The Warsaw U.N. climate talks come as the 19th to review the Kyoto accords, which were extended last December at Doha with a new commitment by 2020 to cut carbon dioxide emissions by at least 18 percent below 1990 levels.

It follows the Fifth Assessment Report in September by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which provided more evidence that human activity was the "dominant cause" of global warming.

Helped by 259 experts from 39 countries, the intergovernmental panel forecast growing global extremes of dryness and wetness, accompanied by rising sea levels, increased migration and spiraling energy prices.

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In late September, Catholic development agencies issued an "urgent call for climate justice," calling on governments to shift from fossil fuel-based economies to low-carbon societies, while helping poorer countries "build sustainable development paths."

If global temperatures rose beyond an international agreed threshold of 2 percent by the end of the century, the Catholic agencies warned, climate change could soon "spiral out of control."

The same message was presented at an Oct. 21 Brussels "dialogue seminar," organized by the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Community and the Conference of European Churches and attended by expert negotiators from the European Union's Bureau of European Policy Advisers.

A statement at the end of the seminar said man-made climate change was now "indisputable," adding that the EU had a "moral responsibility to act," as the second-largest emitter of carbon dioxide, after the United States.

"Continued exploitation of fossil fuel, growth-based economies and a lack of commitment to finance mitigation and adaptation put vulnerable communities at risk," Auxiliary Bishop Theotonius Gomes of Dhaka, Bangladesh, told the Brussels seminar.

"It is the poor who suffer because of climate change and climate injustice. We must take away from that suffering, rather than add to it, by making use of worldwide solutions," he said.

Although Catholic organizations will be in Warsaw conference as observers only, Markus Drake, communications officer for CIDSE, a network of Catholic development agencies in Europe and North America, said he hopes for a strong church platform.

The "strategic aim," he said, would be to lay the groundwork for a new deal on global emissions in 2015,

while also pressing developed countries to deliver on the \$100 billion already pledged annually for climate financing by 2020.

But he said he hopes governments will provide resources not just for long-term carbon dioxide reduction, but also to tackle damage already caused by climate change.

"A lot of the money promised by Western governments simply hasn't materialized," Drake said. "We're hoping to get the message across that these are concerns which should unite and mobilize Catholics worldwide."

Caritas Internationalis set up a climate change desk in 2008 and will issue a report Dec. 11 on climate change and food security.

But church organizations point to other concerns as well.

Heat waves across Europe have increased deaths among older and poorer citizens, while flash floods in Africa have been four times worse than in any previous decade.

While climate-related food shortages have fueled conflict in areas like South Sudan, half of all international disasters are currently connected with climate change.

The Brussels seminar statement said church representatives were ready to make a "substantial contribution" by helping change lifestyles and consumption patterns and by promoting "examples of best practice" within the church.

Drake said he thinks the Catholic church is well placed globally to raise awareness and mobilize a broad-based audience.

In Asia, Africa and Latin America, Catholic leaders are having an impact on the climate change debate, particularly when their own parishes are affected by refugee displacement and agricultural dislocation.

But even where Catholics are only a small minority, such as in India and Bangladesh, the church's charities and associations are also exerting a strong influence.

"Communities under threat are often centered around local churches, who can create sustainable solutions and protect livelihoods," Drake told Catholic News Service Nov. 8. "The science on climate change is now clearly established, so we must ensure faith-based concerns are given a serious hearing."

The Warsaw Conference of the Parties will include a symposium at Warsaw's Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University, attended by church representatives from Nigeria to Indonesia, as well as an ecumenical service at the city's Catholic cathedral and a side event with the Geneva-based World Council of Churches.

Opromolla said Catholic groups will be counting on a new climate change deal to be "fair and just" and ambitious enough to "safeguard dignity and rights for the most vulnerable."

"We know countries represented here have conflicting and sometimes opposing interests. What matters is that the solutions arrived at won't impose unnecessary burdens on those who've contributed least to climate change and have fewest means to counter it," she told CNS.

"Although we don't have the same status and decision-making powers as government representatives, we're confident we'll be heard if our message is strong, united and consistent," she said.

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