

Kyoto Protocol: An environmental victory?

BILLY I AHMED

ENVIRONMENTALIST around the globe rejoiced the historic treaty coming into force on 16 February, but argue that the real impact of the treaty is not tangible. Many protested against Americans arrogance to sign the treaty, saying US are the largest polluters. "The greatest value is symbolic," said Elileen

Claussen, president of the Pew Centre on Global Climate Change, addressing the global warming.

The objective of the treaty is to stabilise the concentration of the gasses in the atmosphere at a level that will avert dangerous climate change -- in a time frame that will allow ecosystems to adapt naturally, and development to proceed sustainably.

Under the treaty, individual target is set for each country according to

its pollution level below 1990 one. EU to reduce by 8 per cent Japan and Canada by 6 per cent, Russia to limit emission rights at 1990 levels, US 7 per cent below 1990 levels. China and India escape the limit.

The history of climate change can be traced back as early as 1750 -- before the industrial revolution the atmosphere held 280 ppm (parts per million) of heat-trapping carbon dioxide. In 1898 a Swedish scientist, Savante Ahrrrenius, warned that

carbon dioxide from burning coal and oil could warm the planet, and in 1955, Charles Keeling, a US scientist, discovered atmospheric carbon dioxide has risen to 315 ppm.

The UN scientists predicted that global average temperature might rise up to 6°C by the end of 2004 bringing a profound climate destabilisation that will result in fiercer storms and rising temperature. In June 2004, the World Meteorological Organisation drew attention to extreme weather events across the world and in a highly unusual move, linked them to global warming explicitly. Rising temperature has already been linked to impacts on agriculture and public health.

After seven years of international debate and the freezing out of George Bush's United States from the international community, the Kyoto Protocol was formally ratified on 16 February 2005, by 141 sovereign nations from 35 industrialised countries. This common understanding on climate change is a positive indication of international co-operation. The first agreement on green house emissions was signed in 1997 by 84 counties in Kyoto, the former capital of Japan, binding the industrialised countries to cut emissions by 5 per cent from their 1990 level by 2012. Kyoto Protocol has its roots in the 1992 UN Framework Convention on Climate change (UNFCC), part of the Rio summit.

To be recognised as international law the agreement required firstly, 55 countries had to get it approved by their national legislatures. Secondly, that the countries approving it had to include a sufficient number of industrial countries to account for 55 per cent of their global emissions in 1990. In March 2001, US President George Bush said his country was not prepared to ratify the treaty, and in December 2003, Kremlin adviser Andrei Illarionov announced that Kyoto ratification would bankrupt Russia's economy, thus Russia would not ratify. The 55 per cent barrier was now breached and the protocol could not become law. This led to a close call of premature obituary of the protocol.

The US unsurprisingly is the world's largest user of energy,

accounting for 36 per cent of carbon emissions of the industrial countries, while Russia's appetite is huge but insufficient energy user, it accounted for 17 per cent of global emissions in 1990.

With Russia's ratification of the agreement in November 2004, Kyoto protocol now met the benchmark to qualify the prerequisite condition to become an international law, even without the countries that have refused to ratify Kyoto, most notably the US and Australia. Thus ushered the Kyoto protocol on 16 February, 2005, which now is legal and binding upon the 141 signatory countries.

President Bush has been particularly singled out as a bad global citizen. Australia known to all as one of the driest countries with harsh weather, considers that as one of the major coal exporting countries it may dent their economy.

Exemption of Chain and India is perhaps not wise. Both these countries are going through stunning economical growth and so is there energy demand becoming monstrous. Such scenario undoubtedly will accelerate the carbon gas emission beyond restriction.

For instance, China is already the world's fifth or sixth-largest economy. It is growing at around 9 per cent a year and relies heavily on fossil fuels for powering this growth. It is the second largest importer of oil. By the Kyoto target year of 2012 China will in all probability have become the world's third largest economy, behind only Japan and the US.

As for India, another up-coming global giant in Asia is also increasing its energy use. Its economy has been growing at almost 7-8 per cent a year. With globalisation, rapid industrialisation, the world's largest road-building programme and the spread of air-conditioning is a sure shot indication of its energy appetite to soar. Hence, carbon emissions of both these budding global giants should be brought under the canopy of Kyoto accord.

So it is very much in the self-interest of China and India as well as other fast-growing developing countries to expand their economies in the "greenest" way possible, that will inevitably improve the environmental performance

To put in the words of Republican Senator John McCain, "If the scientists are wrong about the catastrophic consequence of green-house gases, efforts to limit would still result in cleaner air and a more

competitive industrial base." On the sideline the Kyoto protocol the community should think on new, innovative and affordable technology to wean the world off fossil fuels and provide it with renewable power.

The signing of this treaty is just the dawn -- nothing to hype about it. There lies uphill task to materialise this noble cause into reality to keep this "Blue Planet" habitable. This is only possible through global togetherness, trust, faith and understanding, because the evils of climate change amongst the community are there.

Billy I Ahmed is a researcher.

3.5x2

6x3

6x3

11x4

10x4