

UN climate conference: Surprises and hopes

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THE last two days of the UN Climate Conference, recently held in Montreal were full of surprises. Participants were anxiously waiting to hear about future of the Kyoto Protocol and reduction of emission of greenhouse gases. The United States and Saudi Arabia were deadly against any mandatory emission cut. Despite opposition of these two strong players, at around 6 AM, 10th of December, Chairman of the Conference and Canadian Minister of Environment Mr Stephane Dion declared "Key decisions have been made in several areas. The Kyoto Protocol has been switched on, a dialogue about the future action has begun, parties have moved forward to work on adaptation and advanced the implementation of the regular work programme of the Convention and of the Protocol." More than 150 countries made key decisions that outline the path to future international action on climate change. Under the Kyoto Protocol, the process for future commitments beyond 2012 got underway. A new working group was established to discuss future commitments for developed countries for the period after 2012.

Although meeting of conference of the parties (COP) has been an annual ritual, this year's meeting was significant for a number of reasons. First, the Kyoto Protocol was enforced on February 16 after ratification of the Russian Federation. Therefore the participating countries got a chance to discuss issues arising from Kyoto's entry into force. Second, a clear process for multi-year negotiations needed to be established so that the negotiations could be completed in a timely manner. Third, few years ago an adaptation fund was created for the least developing countries. However, no substantial progress was made to make this

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fund operational. The Montreal meeting was an opportunity to discuss this important issue.

Climate change has become a big threat to human civilisation. In the last century, the world warmed by about one degree Celsius. Sea level rose by about 20 cm over a 100-year period. Effects of these changes are being felt at various corners of the world. In the Himalayas, in Africa and in South America, snow and glaciers are being melted at a rate faster than anytime before. Ice sheets in Greenland are also receding at a faster rate. The Canadian Arctic region is warming at a rate higher than that of other parts of Canada.

Hurricanes are becoming stronger year by year. Small island nations in the Pacific are being threatened by rising sea levels.

For Montreal Climate Conference, it was not an easy sail. The United States and Saudi Arabia did not leave any stone unturned to derail the negotiation. The United States is the single largest polluter or contributes one-third of the world's total annual emission of greenhouse gases (GHGs) to the atmosphere. The US's argument was that it did support emission cut but had to be non-binding. Head of the U.S. delegation reiterated over and over that it did not think formalised agreements like Kyoto

were the way forward in combating climate change. The US insisted that it was investing three billion dollars annually to develop and modernise technology that would eventually reduce GHGs. The position of Bush Administration is contradictory to what the leaders of the US large cities think about cutting back emissions. On June 13 this year, 170 US mayors joined an initiative and committed their cities to meet or beat the Kyoto targets (at least 5% from 1990 levels in the commitment period 2008-2012). Salt Lake City recently won an environmental award for reducing its greenhouse gas emissions by more than 5 percent in the past three years.

Saudi Arabia (a signatory to the Kyoto Protocol) was another troublemaker. Emission is not a problem for Saudi Arabia. But it has vested interest in fossil fuel production and sale. Saudis' apprehension is that enforcement of a mandatory target of emission cut will reduce its energy sale and the economy of the Kingdom will be at risk. In the Montreal Conference, Saudi Arabia's delegation consistently applied 'obstruction' tactics to jeopardise the negotiation. Elliot Morley, U.K. minister of state for climate and the environment said that the Saudis were being exceptionally obstructive. They were blocking every discussion and had made unreasonable demands. They had been a really negative influence and had soured the atmosphere in Montreal.

In the Montreal meeting, more than 40 important decisions were made. These decisions were ranging from continuation of

dialogue on long-term cooperative action to address climate change by enhancing implementation of the Convention to adaptation fund to facilitate adaptation in developing countries. It was recognised that the future of developing countries would be at risk due to climate change. It was acknowledged that the global nature of climate change called for the widest possible cooperation and participation in an effective and appropriate international response, in accordance with the principles of the Convention.

The biggest success of the Conference was to agree on further negotiation to cut GHG emissions beyond 2012. The United States agreed to join the negotiation after being felt totally isolated. It could not master support of a single country to its technology based agenda. However, the US will not participate in any negotiation that will focus on mandatory emission cut. Without agreeing to this, participation of the US would be somewhat meaningless. Despite potential future odds, joining of the US in the negotiation process is indeed a positive step.

The Conference agreed on the initial guidance to an entity entrusted with the operation of the financial mechanism of the Convention, for the operation of the Adaptation Fund. The Adaptation Fund was created few years ago but no substantial progress was made. Operation of the fund was plagued with bureaucracy due to lack of guidance. The Adaptation Fund shall be financed from the share of proceeds on the clean development mechanism project activities and other sources of funding. It was recognised that adaptation to climate change is an integral part of ongoing efforts for sustainable development. At this stage the amount of resources that could be mobilised for adaptation is not known. The 'other sources of funding' are also not explicitly clarified. Few years ago, developed country promised to contribute about half a billion dollar annually for adaptation measures in developing countries. However, the promised resources did not come through. Hope in future, the developed countries will live up to their promise.

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