

Climate change and the road to recovery

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MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

I was quite taken aback with a recent article on global warming by Professor Bjorn Lomborg, Director of the Copenhagen Consensus Center. Known as the 'Skeptical Environmentalist', he has suggested that the world is 'unnecessarily frightened and is exaggerating estimates of sea level rise' and the possible 'harm' that might result from global warming. I must admit that I was surprised to see Mr. Lomborg's lack of concern with our environmental threats.

Climate change, contrary to Mr. Lomborg, is definitely one of the most pressing issues facing our global society as a whole. In fact, scientific data and evidence suggests that unless we alter our behavioral pattern drastically, we will have to deal with catastrophic consequences.

The effects of climate change are already apparent -- glaciers are disappearing, the polar ice caps are melting and our weather pattern is becoming not only unpredictable but more extreme. These changes in turn are having consequences, both social and economic. It is also clear that accelerating global warming will impact on food production and movement of populations internally and also across borders (seeking alternate livelihoods in the

absence of sufficient fresh water due to droughts or erosion of arable land arising out of floods).

The first scientific effort to focus on this problem about fifty-five years ago resulted in the setting up of the Mauna Loa Observatory in Hawaii in 1958. This institution aimed at measuring atmospheric CO2 levels. Since then, the scientific process has moved on, thanks to the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency and its Ibuki satellite launched a few years ago. It is monitoring the density of CO2 and methane gas and checking gas levels in entire columns of atmosphere in 56,000 locations. This is permitting the satellite to discriminate carbon emissions from different countries.

Efforts in this regard would have advanced further had the US National Aeronautics and Space Administration's launch of the Orbiting Carbon Observatory (capable of measuring CO2 entering and leaving the atmosphere close to ground level -- so that the major sources and sinks could be more closely specified) succeeded in February 2009. This was a major disappointment because it not only took eight years to develop this Mission but also set the world back with regard to its understanding of the effects of evolving climate change.

A few weeks ago, the UN International Strategy for Disaster

Reduction (UNISDR) published their Mortality Risk Index to coincide with a UN meeting of the Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction, attended by nearly 2,000 officials and experts (on natural catastrophes). The meeting recognized that 'there literally are no countries in the world that are not potentially affected by hazards'. It was also agreed that Asian countries led by Bangladesh, India, Indonesia and China (with a collective population of over 2.6 billion) dominated the Index that estimates which populations are most at risk from earthquakes, floods, cyclones and landslides. After careful scrutiny, the Conference also felt that countries could reduce the impact of disasters.

It is this last premise that has encouraged our government to take this matter seriously. We have seen both our Prime Minister and our State Minister for Environment and Forest underlining the need for our relevant authorities to plan ahead in how to tackle environmental degradation and possible fallout from climate change. It has already been proposed in the current 2009-10 budget that Taka 7 billion will be set aside as part of the Multi-Donor Trust Fund to respond to the changes in the environment arising out of global warming and rising sea levels.

One needs to point out here the need for a bi-partisan effort in this regard within the political process. Our Jatiyo Sangshad Standing Committee on the Environment participated by representatives from all parties within our Parliament, need to carefully discuss future steps and move forward with a certain degree of consensus. We expect our politicians to desist from doing politics with such a serious issue.

The G-8 leadership now recognizes

the growing impact of global warming. The EU States have for some time understood the reality of the situation. The US Administration is also finally willing to play ball and appear to have mustered the necessary political will to rein in soaring greenhouse gas emissions. It is fortunate that this has happened ahead of the December 2009 global climate meeting to be held in Copenhagen, Denmark.

The importance of this meeting with its unparalleled political opportunities for providing leadership and change is seen as crucial because of Nobel-Prize winning Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC) observation that 'emissions must be stabilized by 2015 and be in decline by 2020'. It is this felt need that has also underscored the requirement for agreeing on a powerful regulatory strategy and how such a legal regime can be applied aggressively.

US President Obama has called for an interim meeting in Italy (after the G-8 Summit), where the world's 15 biggest CO2 emitting countries -- including emerging economies such as China, India and Brazil -- can attempt to find common ground. This would be an important step ahead of the Copenhagen meeting in December this year and could contribute towards the hammering out of an accord to replace the Kyoto Protocol, whose main provisions expire in 2012.

Any one involved with the climate change dialogue knows that there has been little progress on the most important point -- the extent to which rich countries and emerging industrialized countries (like China and India) are willing to cut their emissions. Currently, we still have a lot of discord within the framework of ongoing discussions on climate change. China has called on



developed countries to cut their emissions by 40 per cent by 2020 -- far more than what they plan to do. China also wants the developed countries to give 0.5 per cent to 1.0 per cent of their GDP in assistance to the developing world.

Lack of clarity continues pertaining to the method and means by which poorer, developing nations like Bangladesh will be compensated in terms of money and technology for the greed of others. One hopes that the coming few months ahead of the Copenhagen meeting will address these factors. The participants need to arrive at a consensus not only on these unresolved areas but also be able to identify how additional assistance can be provided to developing nations in their efforts to increase renewable energy generation and in their improve-

ment of energy efficiency through the establishment of smart grids.

China and India have their own interpretations. They feel that they do not need to take the same significant actions that are being taken by other developed countries. Both China and India must however understand that both are part of the solution when it comes to overcoming the challenge of climate change. We are all in this together. Our entire biosphere is threatened by ourselves. Our planet is in peril despite what experts like Professor Lomborg might opine. We must act now for future human well being. We can no longer afford to agree to disagree.

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Spectre of instability in Nepal?

Any government comprising support of 22 parties but devoid of the largest single group in the house is hardly expected to remain stable. When the Maoists have vowed to keep the pot boiling, it will be unrealistic to expect stability in Nepal.

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THE former king of Nepal has broken his long silence. The other day he said he was deeply "anguished and troubled" by the current state of affairs in the country. At the same time Maoist leader and former prime minister Pushpa Kumar Dahal better known as "Prachanda" has threatened street agitation against the new government of prime minister Madhav Kumar Nepal. Ex-king Gyanendra in a statement marking the first anniversary of his cessation as the monarch of the former Himalayan kingdom has given vent to his feelings while a group of his supporters chanted slogans in capital Katmandhu in favour of royalty.

Two diametrically opposite sides --

the former king and his nemesis the Maoists -- have voiced their opposition to the government dropping enough hints that their supporters will not take things kindly in the coming days. Only a few weeks old government of Madhav Kumar is struggling to provide a semblance of political stability amidst growing concern that the picturesque country may well be heading towards another spell of violence and uncertainty.

The government headed by moderate communist leader Madhav Kumar Nepal took over the reins ending nearly a month long vacuum caused by the resignation of prime minister Pushpa Kumar Dahal. The new prime minister had assured his countrymen that he would spare no effort to bring back stability

that had been eluding their new found democracy. But doubts continue to persist whether the new government would really be able to give the nation the much required stability since "Prachanda" and his party (Maoist) are bent upon creating problems for the administration that had replaced theirs.

The Maoists, who form the largest single political group in the constituent assembly, vowed to continue their agitation till the "irregular act" committed by the president is reversed, but the new government stood by the decision creating wider differences between the Maoists and most other political parties headed by the new prime minister.

The tenure of Prachanda government was cut short because of differences among the coalition partners on the issue of dismissing the army chief centering the absorption of the Maoist cadres into the regular army. The army chief's failure to abide by government instruction on the inclusion of about 19,000 former Maoist guerrillas in the armed forces was at the heart of the

crisis. While Prachanda's government was obviously keen to take them in the army, other political parties including the allies in the cabinet were somewhat unwilling fearing that strength of "Prachanda" will increase manifold once they are cadred in the army. President Ram Baran Yadav, who won the largely ceremonial presidency as the nominee of the Nepali Congress and supported by most others barring the Maoists, expectedly took a position that ran counter to Prachanda on the issue.

The development that emerged has not come as a surprise since the political opponents of Prachanda were waiting for a time to avenge their defeat in the polls and they have certainly seized the opportunity. It is also believed that Nepal's powerful and large neighbour India too opposed the sacking of the army chief stemming from the issue of inclusion of the Maoist cadres in the army. The Maoists had obliquely blamed New Delhi for the crisis.

Prime minister Madhav Kumar Nepal says he would continue his efforts to

bring the Maoists in the new administration. There is little likelihood that the Maoists will join the new government unless their conditions are met -- which are quite difficult to be fulfilled. They want president Yadav to "apologise" or rescind the decision on sacking of the army chief, whose removal is also a key demand of the radical leftists. This will be a height of folly to expect that such demands will be met by a government which has come to power differing on these crucial issues.

At the same time, any government comprising support of 22 parties but devoid of the largest single group in the house is hardly expected to remain stable. When the Maoists have vowed to keep the pot boiling, it will be unrealistic to expect stability in Nepal.

Nepal faces a big political problem since the present constituent assembly must have to complete drafting of the new constitution by June, next year. All articles of the constitution have to be ratified by two third majority which is impossible without the cooperation of

the Maoists since they account for forty percent of the total members. Madhav Kumar's government wants to bring the Maoists into the government, but without conceding to their major demands. Nepal braces for trouble ahead unless some kind of understanding is reached between the two sides. However, the differences seem somewhat irreconcilable.

Former king Gyanendra obviously is seeking to fish in the troubled water. With Nepal becoming a secular Republic replacing a Hindu kingdom and people whole heartedly endorsing the decision taken by all political parties, there is not even an iota of possibility that the monarchy may return. Handful of supporters cannot reverse the democratic aspirations that supplanted the throne. What is important for the political parties -- both in power and opposition -- not to let things go to such a pass that people at any stage may bemoan the democratic rule.

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ROBERT S. MCNAMARA

How the bright came to quick confusion...

It was not until mid 1967 that Robert McNamara began to feel his first stabs of pain about the war. More than 500,000 US soldiers had gone to South Vietnam and yet the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong were increasingly gaining ground.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

THE quiet, almost unnoticed death of Robert S. McNamara at the age of ninety-three is hardly any reason not to recall the times he lived in and influenced to a degree not many are capable of. He belonged to that exclusive club of the best and the brightest that came to be symbolic of the Kennedy administration in the early 1960s. As John F. Kennedy would famously tell his people and the world beyond the frontiers of his country, the torch had been passed to a new generation of Americans, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace. McNamara was part of that generation. Only a year older than Kennedy and having served for quite a while as president of Ford Motors, he almost breezed in to take charge of the Pentagon once the president-elect asked him to. But, then, nearly every member of Kennedy's charmed circle was breezing in -- Theodore Sorensen, McGeorge Bundy, Kenny O' Donnell, Robert Kennedy, Pierre Salinger, Dean Rusk -- and send-

ing out the clear message that after years of Eisenhower-era stupor, government was in the process of re-energising itself.

And then it began to go badly wrong. First, there was the fiasco of the Bay of Pigs in 1961. Then there was the near nuclear confrontation with Moscow over Soviet missiles in Cuba in 1962. But if these were difficulties that were soon to be sorted out or papered over, Vietnam was beginning to show that it was going to be an issue America would struggle with for a time longer than anyone could imagine. Where the Dwight Eisenhower administration had, as a way of containing communism in South Vietnam, sent in a handful of advisors to Saigon (today Ho Chi Minh City) to assist President Ngo Dinh Diem in formulating policy against the communist North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong, the Kennedy White House decided, on McNamara's prodding, that sending American soldiers into South Vietnam would be a forceful way of rolling back the communist threat.

And that was precisely the course the

new president took. President Kennedy was not destined to live long and yet in the short time he had remaining between the decision to be more involved in Vietnam and his assassination in November 1963, he appeared to have begun to worry about the consequences of his action in South East Asia. One instance was the effort to deal with the Pathet Lao in Laos. Matters were not helped by the fact that the Diem government was turning increasingly corrupt, to a point where fears of a coup against the Saigon leader and his influential brother Ngo Dinh Nhu began to be voiced. The climax was reached on 1 November 1963, when Diem and Nhu were ousted in a military coup and soon after were shot. John Kennedy himself was murdered in Dallas a mere twenty-one days later.

Robert McNamara's power and influence as secretary of defence clearly went up quite a few notches in the Lyndon Johnson administration that replaced the Kennedy team after JFK's assassination. President Johnson loved shooting from the hip. Intent on bombing the communists into the Stone Age, he found in McNamara the man who would help him bring his plans of saving South Vietnam into fruition. In 1964, Johnson and McNamara invented the lie of the Tonkin Gulf incident to perpetuate the war in Vietnam. The North Vietnamese, it was alleged, had attacked American ships in the gulf. The president asked Congress for more powers in order to be able to prosecute

the war. Congress obliged readily, though soon enough it became clear to politicians like Senator J. William Fulbright that they had been duped into taking the lie for the truth. In all this convoluted plan of expanding the war, McNamara played a vigorous role. He and the president made it a point to travel frequently to Saigon, where they were briefed by General William Westmoreland and other officers on how 'well' the war was going for Washington.

It was not until mid 1967 that Robert McNamara began to feel his first stabs of pain about the war. More than 500,000 US soldiers had gone to South Vietnam and yet the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong were increasingly gaining ground. Body bags containing the remains of dead American soldiers were arriving in American cities with alarming frequency. Respected journalists like Walter Lippmann were beginning to question the wisdom of prosecuting a war that was proving to be pointless. Young Americans were beginning to demonstrate on campuses and in the streets to demand an end to the war. LBJ was jeered day and night. The slogan, 'Hey, hey LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?' became a refrain at antiwar rallies. David Halberstam was to write scathingly of McNamara in his sarcasm-drenched tome, *The Best And The Brightest*.

McNamara went from doubt to despair. And then he told President Johnson of his plans to leave. McNamara left the Pentagon in



February 1968. A few months later, he took charge as president of the World Bank, where he was to serve with credit for thirteen years until 1981, when he decided to quit voluntarily. He then went into consultancy and also found a new role as a commentator on defence issues. But all this carving out of a new role did not quite help McNamara tide over his part in the making of the Vietnam War. He stayed silent on the conflict for nearly three decades after leaving office as defence secretary, until 1995 when he chose to come forth with his version of events in a book he called *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*. He was properly

contrite about the way things had turned out, acknowledged the flaws that had marked his policies and wept on television as he recalled the 58,000 Americans who had gone to their deaths in Vietnam.

Robert McNamara's was a brilliant mind. The tragedy is that he quite ruined the brilliance through a misplaced belief in his own perceptions of how the world needed to be run. Then again, all those others in that grand accumulation of Kennedy-era grey matter were guilty of similar misdemeanours.

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