

Durban pledges

Efforts must go on beyond the conference

THE 17th Conference of Parties (COP17) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) has ended on a note of agreement towards a legal deal covering all countries. The process, beginning next year, is to be completed by 2015 and put into effect by 2020. While the action has been hailed as a "historic breakthrough" by some, others have criticised it for not being aggressive enough, and as containing a loophole which may be exploited by the major polluting countries to get out of a legal binding.

The Kyoto Protocol, signed in 1997, was proof that a global agreement could be reached despite several odds, but its targets remain to be met, with the first phase deadline expiring next year. The Durban deal may be seen as another step in the right direction -- with the compromise averting a collapse of the talks -- but negotiations and efforts must be stepped up. The slower the efforts are, the more difficult it will be to fight climate change. As it is, carbon emission levels remain high, with global temperatures continuing to rise, increasing the likelihood of worse droughts, floods, storms and rising sea levels.

Political will, especially of the rich and major polluting nations, is lacking. It is up to the emerging nations and LDCs, some of whom are the worst affected in the world, to push their agenda through concerted efforts. Bangladesh, one of the most vulnerable nations, has played a significant role at Durban as well as at the preceding Climate Vulnerable Forum, but it too must now carry on the efforts and engage countries such as the US, China, India and Brazil in doing more before the next climate negotiations. Indeed, higher level political and diplomatic efforts will be necessary across the board and especially so among the vulnerable countries if the battle against climate change is to be sustained and led to a satisfactory outcome. So far, in terms of action, conferences, negotiations and pledges have been many, but results have been few and the world continues to head towards environmental disaster.

How can the SC directives be ignored?

Somebody should be held to account

IT is indeed astonishing that a draft guideline related to ship-breaking and recycling, prepared by the industry's ministry has ignored the directive of the Supreme Court mandating strict compliance of environmental laws of the country. Reportedly, some sections of the draft law that allow import of ships with hazardous substance, as also war ships and nuclear powered ships, violate rules and laws that ensure both workers' safety and prevent environmental pollution. And to top it all, the new guideline is based on a law obsolescent since 2006 and an international convention that will not take effect before 2015.

There is no denying that ship-breaking has assumed significance as a major industry and has a strong link with our economy. But regrettably, neither the caveats with regard to the type of ship that can be imported had been respected nor the minimum safety measures of the workers been fully ensured. It cannot be lost on the policy makers that 36 workers have been killed and many more that number injured in the last six months only in this industry.

The unchecked growth of ship-breaking yards in the coastal area of Chittagong has had tremendous deleterious impact on the ecology of the region in particular. The SC order was in that respect most timely and appropriate. Even World Bank reports apprehend that if this trend continues the Bangladesh coastline will face more environmental pollution than Pakistan in the next two decades.

One wonders what might be the motivation for circumventing the directives of the highest court of the land. And we wonder too whether the environment ministry has been kept out of the loop. It is not enough for the Secretary to say that they had tried their best to comply with the SC directives. The situation demands

MD RASHED CHOWDHURY

EVERYONE agrees that we are in the midst of a global freshwater crisis. Around the world, rivers, lakes, and aquifers are dwindling faster than Mother Nature can possibly replenish them; industrial and household chemicals are rapidly polluting what's left. Meanwhile, global population is ticking skyward. Goldman Sachs estimates that global water consumption is doubling every 20 years, and the United Nations expects demand to outstrip supply by more than 30% come 2040.

In the coming decades, as growing numbers of people live in urban areas and climate change makes some regions much more prone to drought, water will become an increasingly scarce resource. By 2030, nearly half of the world's population will inhabit areas with severe water stress, according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation & Development.

Unfortunately, Bangladesh is one of the countries that will suffer the most. In the Himalayas, the storage of precipitation in the form of snow and ice (in glaciers) over a long period provides a large water reservoir that regulates annual water distribution in the greater Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna (GBM) basin areas. The majority of rivers originating in the Himalayas have their upper catchments in snow-covered areas and flow through steep mountains.

By and large, dry-season flow in the major Himalayan rivers in a given year results from the monsoon rainfall of the previous year. If there is any climatic change in the mountain hydrological regimes, it is likely to alter these resources, and severely affects lower riparian Bangladesh that depends on this water resource. From the decadal trends in the rainfall variability in Bangladesh, it has been observed that significant deviation of monthly rainfall from one decade to the other has occurred, and the varia-

tions of total seasonal rainfall, the timing of onset, peak, and recession have changed considerably. As a result, the scarcity of pure drinking water is gradually increasing at a dramatic pace in both urban and rural areas in Bangladesh.

The rush to control water resources is gathering speed around the planet. In Australia, brokers in urban areas are buying up water rights from farmers. Rural residents around the U.S. are trying to sell their land (and water) to multinational water bottlers like Nestlé. Companies that use large quantities of the precious resource to run their businesses are seeking to lock up water supplies. One is Royal Dutch Shell, which is buying ground-water rights in Colorado as it prepares to drill for oil in the shale deposits there.

The other recent initiative of private-public partnership control of

In Australia, brokers in urban areas are buying up water rights from farmers. Rural residents around the US are trying to sell their land (and water) to multinational water bottlers.

water is in Sitka, Alaska, which is home to one of the world's most spectacular lakes. Nestled in a U-shaped valley of dense forests and majestic peaks, and fed by snow-pack and glaciers, the reservoir, named Blue Lake for its deep blue hues, holds trillions of gallons of water so pure that it requires no treatment. The city's tiny population -- fewer than 10,000 people spread across 5,000 square miles -- makes this an embarrassment of riches. Every year, as countries around the world struggle to meet the water needs of their citizens, 6.2 billion gallons of Sitka's reserves go unused. That could soon change. In a few months, if all goes according to plan, 80 million gallons of Blue Lake water will be siphoned

into the kind of tankers normally reserved for oil, and shipped to a bulk bottling facility near Mumbai. From there it will be dispersed among several drought-plagued cities throughout the Middle East.

The project is the brainchild of two American companies. One, True Alaska Bottling, has purchased the rights to transfer 3 billion gallons of water a year from Sitka's bountiful reserves. The other, S2C Global, is building the water-processing facility in India. If the companies succeed, they will have brought what Sitka hopes will be a \$90 million industry to their city, not to mention a solution to one of the world's most pressing climate conundrums. They will also have turned life's most essential molecule into a global commodity.

Now the question is, if water is the kind of precious commodity that oil became in the 20th century, can deliv-

ery of clean water to those who need it be the same sort of powerful force as the environmental movement in an age of climate change? And, in another sense of green, is there money to be made in a time of water scarcity? The answer to both questions, according to environmental activists watching a global forum on water, is yes. So, what happens to those who can't pay for it? It is an absolute human need -- people can live as much as 30 days without food but only seven without water. Now, while the World Bank is arguing higher prices (even for water) are a good thing, others are nervous! Right now, no public utility anywhere prices water based on how scarce it is or how much it costs to deliver, and that,

privatisation proponents argue, is the root cause of such rampant overuse. If water costs more, they say, we will conserve it better.

In the late 1990s, the World Bank infamously required scores of impoverished countries, most notably Bolivia, to privatise their water supplies as a condition of desperately needed economic assistance. The hope was that markets would eliminate corruption and big multinationals would invest the resources needed to bring more water to more people. The multinational corporations came and invested huge sums of money. They increased water rates to more than double. As a result, it left thousands of Bolivians who couldn't pay without any water whatsoever. The company said price hikes were needed to repair and expand the dilapidated infrastructure. Critics insisted they served only to maintain unrealistic profit margins. By 2000, Bolivian citizens had taken to the streets in a string of violent protests and the protesters sent the companies packing. But, by 2001, the public utility had resumed control.

So what do we do now? On the one hand, most of the world views water as a basic human right (the U.N. General Assembly voted unanimously to affirm it as such). On the other, it's becoming so expensive to obtain and supply that most governments cannot afford to shoulder the cost alone. Ultimately, both public and private entities will have to work together, and they need to start it now! Unless we manage our water better now, we will run out. When that happens, according to above Newsweek article, no pricing or management scheme in the world will save us.

The writer is a Principal Research Scientist, Pacific ENSO Applications Climate Center (PEAC), University of Hawaii at Manoa, USA. (Email: rashed@hawaii.edu).

| The New York Times EXCLUSIVE

Marching off the cliff

NOAM CHOMSKY

A task of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, now under way in Durban, South Africa, is to extend earlier policy decisions that were limited in scope and only partially implemented.

These decisions trace back to the UN Convention of 1992 and the Kyoto Protocol of 1997, which the US refused to join. The Kyoto Protocol's first commitment period ends in 2012. A fairly general pre-conference mood was captured by a *New York Times* headline: "Urgent Issues but Low Expectations."

As the delegates meet in Durban, a report on newly updated digests of polls by the Council on Foreign Relations and the Program on International Policy Attitudes reveals that "publics around the world and in the United States say their government should give global warming a higher priority and strongly support multilateral action to address it."

Most US citizens agree, though PIPA clarifies that the percentage "has been declining over the last few years, so that American concern is significantly lower than the global average -- 70% as compared to 84%."

"Americans do not perceive that there is a scientific consensus on the need for urgent action on climate change (euro). A large majority think that they will be personally affected by climate change eventually, but only a minority thinks that they are being affected now, contrary to views in most other countries. Americans tend to underestimate the level of concern among other Americans."

These attitudes aren't accidental. In 2009 the energy industries, backed by business lobbies, launched major campaigns that cast doubt on the near-unanimous consensus of scientists on the severity of the threat of human-induced global warming. The consensus is only "near-

unanimous" because it doesn't include the many experts who feel that climate-change warnings don't go far enough, and the marginal group that deny the threat's validity altogether.

The standard "he says/she says" coverage of the issue keeps to what is called "balance": the overwhelming majority of scientists on one side, the denialists on the other. The scientists who issue the more dire warnings are largely ignored.

One effect is that scarcely one-third of the US population believes that there is a scientific consensus on the threat of global warming -- far less than the global average, and radically inconsistent with the facts.

It's no secret that the US government is lagging on climate issues. "Publics

Energy Agency, which was formed on the initiative of US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger in 1974, issued its latest report on rapidly increasing carbon emissions from fossil fuel use.

The IEA estimated that if the world continues on its present course, the "carbon budget" will be exhausted by 2017. The budget is the quantity of emissions that can keep global warming at the 2 degrees Celsius level considered the limit of safety.

IEA chief economist Fatih Birol said: "The door is closing (euro) if we don't change direction now on how we use energy, we will end up beyond what scientists tell us is the minimum (for safety). The door will be closed forever."

Also last month, the U.S. Department of Energy reported the

outcomes.

As these ominous reports were released, the *Financial Times* devoted a full page to the optimistic expectations that the US might become energy-independent for a century with new technology for extracting North American fossil fuels.

Though projections are uncertain, the *Financial Times* reports, the US might "leapfrog Saudi Arabia and Russia to become the world's largest producer of liquid hydrocarbons, counting both crude oil and lighter natural gas liquids."

In this happy event, the U.S. could expect to retain its global hegemony. Beyond some remarks about local ecological impact, the *Financial Times* said nothing about what kind of a world would emerge from these exciting prospects. Energy is to burn; the global environment be damned.

Just about every government is taking at least halting steps to do something about the likely impending catastrophe. The US is leading the way -- backward. The Republican-dominated U.S. House of Representatives is now dismantling environmental measures introduced by Richard Nixon, in many respects the last liberal president.

This reactionary behaviour is one of many indications of the crisis of US democracy in the past generation. The gap between public opinion and public policy has grown to a chasm on central issues of current policy debate such as the deficit and jobs. However, thanks to the propaganda offensive, the gap is less than what it should be on the most serious issue on the international agenda today -- arguably in history.

The hypothetical extraterrestrial observers can be pardoned if they conclude that we seem to be infected by some kind of lethal insanity.

The writer is a Professor of linguistics and philosophy at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge, Mass.

© New York Times. Distributed by the New York Times Syndicate.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

December 13

1949
The Knesset votes to move the capital of Israel to Jerusalem.

1988
Palestinian Leader Yasser Arafat gives a speech at the United Nations General Assembly in the Swiss city of Geneva after the United States authorities refused to give him a visa to enter New York.

2001
The Indian Parliament Sansad is attacked by terrorists. 15 people are killed, including all the terrorists.

2002
Enlargement of the European Union: The European Union announces that Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia will become members from May 1, 2004.

2003
Former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein is captured near his home town of Tikrit (see Operation Red Dawn).