

COPENHAGEN: WHAT HAPPENED? WHAT NOW?

by Suzanne Golas CSJP

Copenhagen in December is dark. The sun rises around 8:30am and is already setting by 3:30pm. Some would say this prevalence of darkness is symbolic of the results of the UN Climate Summit, known as COP15, which took place December 7-18 in this northern city. Numerous meetings and discussions at the UN in New York continue to analyze what happened and what didn't happen at Copenhagen. Depending on what you read, the conference was a total disaster or a small, but significant step in the international community's genuine efforts to deal with climate change. It is generally acknowledged, however, that the results fell far short of expectations, which were probably far too optimistic, and disappointment was and is widespread. Following is a brief attempt at an objective overview of the Summit and some recommendations for next steps.

ISSUES

There were several key issues that proved very contentious. However, it is important to note that no delegation, no negotiator, no head of state questioned the validity and seriousness of the problem. Climate change is a reality and a serious threat to life on Earth. Human activity is a major cause of the problem. The effects are already being felt and negatively impacting especially poor nations. The voices of these nations, especially the small island developing nations and the poorest countries of Africa, were strong and passionate in demanding a fair, ambitious and binding (FAB) agreement. "We are drowning!" "We may go down first, if there is not an agreement, but you will follow." Such were some of their statements.

As is often the case, the challenge is in reaching agreement on the details of addressing the problem, especially when



Tata Rafael Quispe, representative of Bolivian indigenous people; Suzanne Golas; Elyzabeth Peredo, wife of the Bolivian ambassador to the UN; Ann Braudis, Marynoll NGO representative to the UN

nations' economies and strategic plans are affected.

Following are some examples of key issues that proved to be stumbling blocks.

- Reduction of greenhouse emissions – While the developing countries demanded that the combined nations' target for reduction of greenhouse emissions should be 40% by 2020, the national pledges of developed countries at this point do not exceed 20%.
- Transparency called for ongoing disclosure of countries to the international community on how they were meeting their emissions commitments. Some countries, such as China, resisted such disclosure arguing that it would be a violation of their national sovereignty.
- In the end, developed countries did agree to finance a 10 billion dollar a year, three year program to fund developing nation's projects to deal with drought, floods and other impacts of climate change, and to develop clean energy. They also set a goal of mobilizing 100 billion dollars by 2020 for the same purposes. However, it remains unclear as to how this funding will be managed. (It is important to remember that the impoverished nations, already suffering drastically from climate change, did very little to contribute to the problem, and have very limited resources to deal with the effects.)



In the last few hours of negotiations, a handful of nations, including the strong voice of the United States, presented the “Copenhagen Accord,” which is considered a somewhat general (some would say “weak”) document that does however have countries committing to emissions reductions. Countries not included in these final negotiations, that is, most of the countries present, resented the lack of collaboration. Those countries that did not sign the Accord had until Jan. 31 to sign on and also indicate their specific commitment to emission reductions.

While COP15 did not live up to expectations, it did provide “stepping stones” for future concrete decisions. For the first time, over a hundred heads of state, themselves, were directly engaged in negotiations (usually left to countries’ negotiating teams). Some have said that COP15 did not live up to expectations because nations finally realized that addressing climate change will require hard decisions that will change the way they plan for the future. Perhaps, for the first time there was a realization that climate change is a major threat to Earth’s life that can only be solved through working together with all the compromises that implies. Efforts to arrive at that fair, ambitious and binding (FAB) agreement will continue and hopefully lead to such a result at COP16 which will take place in Mexico City in December 2010.

NGO CONTRIBUTION

Over 45,000 non-governmental representatives arrived in Copenhagen for this Summit. Their presence was a constant reminder to the nations’ negotiators that “The world was watching,” a statement heard repeatedly in official and non-official sessions. The voice of the “grassroots” was present in special events, in written papers, in workshops, press conferences, marches and demonstrations, in the halls and on the streets. Bridgetta Rooney, CSJP, with a group from the UK, marched through Copenhagen with thousands of concerned citizens from around the world. An image that remains with me is the computer center within the Bella Center, site of the Summit. There were over 1000 computers and, at any time during the day, NGOs, speaking different languages, would be at the computers organizing the information they were emailing back home. Truly, “the world was watching.”

I represent the CSJPs on the UN/ NGO Committee on Sustainable Development. The CSJPs, along with over a hundred other NGOs throughout the world, endorsed

a statement that was sent, through the UN system, to the Summit’s official delegations. The statement, in an introduction to specific recommendations, captured the spirit of many NGOs: “We need to become globally earth-centered, with respect for global human rights, and reverence and compassion for all living beings.... There is no alternative. Let not future generations, impacted by global warming, say of us, “They knew, but did not act.”

WHAT NOW?

The C4 Committee will be meeting in February to plan for further action on climate change. A few suggestions for now:

- Advocacy remains especially important. In the UK, look for opportunities to support the highest reduction of greenhouse emissions possible. In the US, follow and encourage efforts in the Senate to pass an effective energy, emissions control bill.
- Education; research is showing that, in both the US and the UK, concern for and even belief in global warming are diminishing. Be familiar, yourself, with basic facts on climate change, share this information and discuss your concern with others.
- Prayer connects us with God and also with other believers. Pray that we may all grow in our consciousness of our oneness with others and act in that sense of oneness on this crucial issue.



Members of the UN NGO Committee on Sustainable Development display banner with signatures for the “Seal the Deal” campaign.