

Developing nations paying for the sin of the rich

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Article

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LAST week was World Environment Day. Coming just a day before the start of the Group of Eight (G8) meeting (June 6-8) gave it a special significance.

The meeting—held in Germany, the current European Union and G8 presidencies—had global warming and climate change high on its agenda. But not without great difficulty.

Way before the meeting, US president George W Bush eagerly unveiled his plan for a "new" global framework to fight climate change, but many are sceptical.

The US expects to set a long-term global goal for reducing greenhouse gases by the end of 2008 which is non-binding.



The industries of the development nations are the worst polluters in the world.

To meet the goal, Bush's ambitious plan is to push G8 leaders (collectively responsible for most of greenhouse gases) to be among the "coalition of the willing".

This, however, may not be easy as the US itself has a poor track record of willingness to realise the mission set by the 1997 United Nations-sponsored Kyoto Protocol.

Worse, the current US suggestion seems to sideline the UN mechanism once again.

Not surprisingly, the G8 has been "divided into competing camps", to quote the UN Secretary General (IHT, June 5).

The German host, for example, is more decisive in setting a limit of global warming to 2°C, and has endorsed "cap trade" strategies to cut emissions — even with existing technology.

This would allow companies to trade with each other when it comes to reducing the release of carbon into the atmosphere.

The US has accused Germany of ignoring its position and resisting to amend the draft communique.

Europe has been critical the US — purportedly the worst culprit—has been dragging its feet on global warming.

Moreover, Europe is still fresh from experiencing a severe windstorm, on Jan 18.

It was regarded as the deadliest storm to strike the continent since 1999, with hurricane-like winds up to 190kph.

There were also reports of extreme precipitation and, in some locations, snow. Over two million had no power, resulting in widespread business interruptions.

Tens of thousands of travellers had to cancel their trips or experienced delays.

In all, the economic loss amounted to over US\$ 1 billion (RM3.4 billion) with parts of Austria, England, France,

Germany, The Netherlands and Scotland being affected.

Many attributed this to the effects of global warming which could be traced to the greenhouse gases.

Ultimately, heat is trapped inside the atmosphere, and this causes the temperatures on the Earth's surface to rise as the trapped heat continues to increase.

This is only the beginning since higher air temperatures can also increase water vaporisation and melting of ice.

Thus, small glaciers are starting to disappear while the larger ones will be greatly reduced by 2050.

The ice mass in Greenland has already begun to decrease dramatically.

At the same time, more and more areas will be experiencing floods due to rising sea levels.

Accordingly, as greenhouse gas emissions worsen, countries around the world will suffer from a variety of impacts.

Come 2080, it has been estimated that about 100 million will be facing floods each year.

And between 200 million and 600 million could be chronically starving if global warming continues unabated.

Given what is known today, it seems reasonable to liken the effects of global climate change to be "as bad as war" as the UN Secretary-General has said.

As he rightly alluded: "An inconvenient truth has become an unfortunate reality."

One such unfortunate circumstance may be just around the corner, based on a study released by the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

It predicts as many as 10 (compared to an average of about six) hurricanes could form in the Atlantic Ocean before the year is out.

Of that number, five could turn out to be major ones and the probability of the US being hit by hurricanes is very high.

On a more general note, some 17 named storms are expected during the season which started on June 1 and lasts until Nov 30.

Another unfortunate reality is that efforts to reverse global warming are literally very complex and costly.

Oxfam, the well-known British charity organisation, last week revealed that the US alone should pay US\$22 billion annually to developing countries to help them adapt to the effects of climate change (FT, May 29).

Oxfam worked out the figures by using the ranking of countries based on their emission levels, and combining it with their ability to pay as gauged from the UN Human Development Index.

For Japan, the figure is US\$6.5 billion, Germany US\$3.5 billion and Britain US\$2.5 billion.

Oxfam claims its calculations were based on the amount of greenhouse gases that the countries emitted between 1992 and 2003.

This takes into account the cost incurred over the decade since governments around the world agreed at the Earth Summit in Rio to take action on climate change.

The unfortunate reality, however, is very few ever did, if any.

Instead the big emitters are busy pushing the cost onto someone else and side-stepping the responsibility to curb emissions.

This is clear from still another unfortunate reality, that is, so far the amount pledged by the developed countries to help the developing countries to cope with climate change has been a measly US\$ 182 million.

Unless they are prepared to cough up the billions, as calculated by Oxfam, it is difficult to see any global impact.

More likely, it would remain as lip service or, at worse, another subtle economic ploy whereby the majority of the developing countries will continue to pay for the environmental sins of the past, caused by the unsustainable model of progress adopted by the rich economies.

This, undoubtedly, is yet another unfortunate reality, one that Third World countries will continue to suffer from.

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