

Human Rights and Climate Change Lost in translation?

***By Rajendra Shende, Chairman, TERRE Policy Center,
Former Head of UNEP***

We are witnessing yet another global gathering on Climate Change. This time it is in Durban, in South Africa. After much hyped global jamboree in Copenhagen, in 2009, there was relatively low-ebb gathering in Cancun in Mexico in 2010. And now the climate crowd comes southwards. Are we expecting a change? Yes, climate change will continue, may be even at rapid pace and may even have run-away reaction with possibility of the 'mega-catastrophes'. That's what the latest release from Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) stated. But change in climate of the negotiations is certainly not expected. Not even in near future.

I met one of the USA Senators couple of months back. I have never seen a politician who is so sure about the negative outcome. In general politicians, while talking, spread optimism and sprinkle hopes among the audience. This Senator told me, " Nothing is going to happen on the climate negotiations for next 4-5 years. Our only hope was Barak Obama but that was 4 years back! He now will not move an inch from his present climate-inertia till the election in 2012 and then another 4 years till (hopefully) the budget-deficit issue and unemployment are settled. He is unlikely to even utter a words 'Climate Change' which he used so often in his first Presidential campaign" he declared so decidedly. Well, climate does change!

Interestingly, the climate change issue has become now neo-political issue. It will soon be the issue to be studied by

political scientists rather than environmental or atmospheric scientists.

12000 strong delegates from more than 190 countries that have gathered in Durban will hear repeatedly that China and India are now contributing to Climate Change like never before. Indeed, China has become the largest emitter of green house gases , overtaking USA. This is not surprising considering the enormous population of China coupled with its amazing economic development. Use of fossil fuels and hence the emission of carbon dioxide- a major Green House Gas- are now intricately linked to the economic development of any country. India too is not lagging behind. It is now 4th largest emitter of green house gases in the world!

When the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) was signed in 1992, the situation was totally different. Both India and China were no-where near top of the list of polluters. The common but differentiated responsibility principle which became backbone of the multilateral environmental negotiations in 1990's, required that developed countries-who were the largest emitters-take action first, and the developing countries would follow the suit some time in future. This paved the way for legally binding targets for the developed countries without any similar targets for the developing countries. It was also agreed in 1992 that the funding would be made available by the developed countries for the reducing the emission of the green house gases (called 'mitigation") in the developing countries.

19 years down the lane, the game board now looks different, it has now quite changed. Developed countries are demanding that developing countries like India and China should take responsibility and legally binding targets like that taken by the developed countries as their emissions are also significant, nay disturbingly high.

But things have not changed for the negotiators from India and China! They openly and vehemently insist that promise is promise. They are reminding of the promise and demanding the response to the question: what happened to the promises given by the developed countries in Copenhagen and in Cancun? There the developed countries assured that from 2010 to 2012, USD 30 billion would be made available to the developing countries and then enhancing that amount to USD 100 billion every year for the climate friendly technologies and also for the adaptation measures in the developing countries. These promises are not forth coming .

These political statements, apart from present financial crisis, stand to overshadow Durban meeting. But caught in between these arguments are small island countries like Maldives. IPCC report says that sea level rise due to climate change would be anywhere between 18 to 60 cms by the end of this century. That would threaten the life of the people in about 40 small island countries. The population there need to be shifted, people need the shelter elsewhere. Number of people from these countries has already started shifting (many term this as environmental migration or climate change refugees) to the bigger and safer countries. People from Tuvalu have started migrating to Australia and New Zealand. “ Our survival is not guaranteed, what ever the decisions that countries will take in Durban”, said Dessina Williams, President of the Alliance of the Small Island States in Durban.

This raises the question of human rights and challenges for the United Nations as an organization under which the “Universal Declaration of Human rights” has been adopted. The article 3 of this declaration says that:

“Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.”

Due to inaction on the climate change for last 20 years, the life, liberty and security of the people in small island countries has now come under serious threat. How the negotiations in Durban would address this human right issue is something is totally forgotten. Human issue rights and Climate Change has been lost in the crowd of 12000 delegates and political statements of the leaders! But it has not vanished, it would surface soon.

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