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EQUAL RIGHTS TO THE ATMOSPHERE

EQUITY
WATCH

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Preventing climate change is not just an economic or an environmental issue. It is, above all, a moral and ethical issue.

—Anil Agarwal,
Founder Director,

Centre for Science and Environment

ETHICS

'Your relation to your self in the act'

Talk about bad taste. Denmark, currently president of the European Union, announced yesterday that developing countries would not get any money for adapting to climate change until they start discussing reduction commitments. The remark literally amounts to a slap on our face, an implication that bribery, not dialogue among equals, is the best way to conduct negotiations with developing countries. Is blackmail the basis for global engagement and decision-making these days?

Adaptation funds have been on the negotiations agenda for several years now. Industrialised countries, including progressive countries like Denmark, have run away from committing anything concrete, and developing countries have not been able to pin down any liability on them. Now, out of the blue, they start flashing their wallets again, and commit a paltry US \$1.5 million for least developed countries, while announcing that the other developing countries won't get any, because they're not being good!

Denmark is eager to get developing countries to 'start talking' about future developing country commitments. Instead of relying on financial muscle, they should remember the ethical responsibility they committed themselves to, and understand that any such talk is 'in bad faith' in the current climate of global distrust. Developed countries are afraid that 'just talking' about commitments could be the first step down a very slippery slope that leads to the undoing of the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities. In fact, if developing countries are asked to take on commitments in the

Illustrations: RUSTAM VANIA



second commitment period, then this principle will be reduced to mere tokenism, since by then, there is no way that the rich countries would have taken action commensurate with their responsibility for global warming. The cuts they have taken on in the first commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol are minute, compared to the amount of carbon dioxide they have pumped into the Earth's atmosphere.

If Denmark and the other developed countries want to start discussing developing country targets, they had better start behaving like they are serious about taking responsibility for their emissions, and start making policy changes in their own countries. Instead of bullying poorer countries, their monetary and political influence would be better used to bring the US back to the multilateral table. This might make poorer countries believe that they are not being trapped into bearing the burden of climate change mitigation, while rich countries buy their way out. That countries like Denmark are not simply trying to perpetuate a situation

where the poor do not get the ecological space they need for their development, but are kept forever on dole, forever dependant on Northern largesse.

Finally, Southern leaders are equally to blame for encouraging the perception that they can be bought. Additional finance has become their constant refrain in these negotiations, drowning out any other valid interventions they may make. There are many instances when finance has been their predominant concern — the creation of a multilateral fund played a big part in convincing many developing countries to sign the Montreal Protocol, despite the fact that they were not part of the negotiations for the text, and it did not adequately represent their concerns. So if industrialised countries get the impression that money, rather than any moral or ethical consideration, is the way to deal with developing countries, then our leaders must be held responsible for this reputation. They should show more spine and substance when protecting the interests of their poor populations. ■



PRESIDENT OF COP8 WORKING HARD AT THE DELHI DECLARATION

The Centre for Science and Environment is a non-profit organisation committed to advocating for a better future.



ALL SAID AND DONE

SUNITA NARAIN



In good hope

I will NOT write about the Delhi declaration. Grown-up men and women have spent the last five years endlessly meeting, fussing about full stops and commas to shape the Kyoto Protocol. Now the squabble is whether the name Kyoto Protocol will even figure in the final text. What an indictment of the entire process.

I want, instead to discuss with you, what we will do next. I am worried about what stares us in the face. It is very clear after this conference that climate negotiations are in deep trouble — much more than ever before. The dogfight between the European Union, climate-fixers, and the US — climate-baiters — is out in the open. The rest of the world — climate-watchers — are happy to look on and cheer. It is also clear that, post-September 11, the US camp is even more determined to wreck the negotiations. Till last year, it was a civil sparring match. Now it is civil war — fight to the finish, no holds barred. The US had rejected the Kyoto Protocol. But now it has made it clear that it will work overtime to destroy it. The sorry Delhi conference is proof. All it ends up doing is to repeat the dead compromises made a month ago at the Johannesburg summit.

Then there is the EU. It wants the Kyoto Protocol to salve its conscience and for political survival — appease its green constituency back home. But it is not a monolith. Some members always found it difficult to meet Kyoto targets. These climate laggards wanted to sabotage the process, but not take blame. So they hid behind the US. Now the favourite whipping boy has slipped away. The EU stands exposed.

How ingenuously have they pushed developing countries against the protocol wall! Agree to legally binding commitments. Else, no discussions on finance. You large developing countries, you are responsible as well.

How else does one explain the brilliant EU stratagem to insist at this CoP, not on the need for ratification and effective implementation of the protocol but future commitments? Protocol hara-kiri, I call it.

Let's move on to Russia, Canada and Australia. All key to the Kyoto's magic number. But playing hard to get. Wooed and cajoled by both sides today, their price is going up by each day. My money is on the US winning. Game, set and match.

In this death-match, what will we developing countries do? My bet is we will be greedy and short-sighted. Our industry — I take my cue from the blinkered Indian industry — will argue the best policy is to take-the-money-and-run. If the US throws crumbs in the name of bilateral projects, peck it up. And if the EU gives cumbersome procedures and crumbs in the name of the clean development mechanism, take it as well. Money has no morality. And certainly our leaders have shown that they have the minds of beggars in these negotiations. Of course, in all this we will do nothing to push for more effective action. That would be asking us to actually care about climate change.

So who cares if we will be the losers? All of us. Let us be clear about this. The US strategy for energy intensity is a path straight to hell. Emissions will increase, even as the economy becomes somewhat more energy and emission efficient. Nobody denies this. Nobody also denies that climate change is real and frightening. That, for emissions to be stabilised at levels at which the impacts will be bearable, the world must make deep and urgent reductions in today's emissions. The Kyoto targets do not even begin to address the problem of climate change.

What should you and I do? We do not jump out of the ring. No way. On the contrary. I believe it is time we gave up our genteel behaviour and started calling a spade a spade. It is amazing to me how in the last ten years civil voices — both NGO and governmental — have become soft and accommodating. We wanted to play the game so desperately we never realised that the game is playing us today.

It is time to regroup. Rework strategy. The first is to reject this Delhi declaration for the empty farce it is. Let us tell the CoP president T R Baalu, that we will not allow him to compromise. Not in our name. Tell Baalu, loudly, clearly and stridently that we reject his draft because it is weak and visionless. It will mortgage our present and future. Tell him that we demand more. Tell him that we are right. He is wrong. Shamelessly so.

How to adapt

Is law the answer?

The highly controversial adaptation issue has reached a deadlock in CoP-8. Industrialised countries have failed to contribute towards adaptation measures in developing countries. Developing countries, on the other hand, have failed to demand concrete action. In an ideal world, the 'polluter pays' principle would be applied to adaptation. This would allow communities or developing countries to sue industrialised countries for causing climate change, leading to adverse environmental conditions in their countries. But not in the real world of CoP-8. An under-secretary with the Union ministry of environment and forests (MEF), India, says, "No one has raised the issue of liability in CoP-8. Even if someone does try, it will never go through, for developed countries have a lot at stake."

He has a point

Liability is an important link in the adaptation process. At present, this concept lacks clarity and direction. Could the Netherlands-based International Court of Justice (ICJ), where most inter-country issues are raised, be a platform for climate change litigations? Tuiloma Neroni Slade, permanent representative to the UN from Samoa, a small island state, has reservations. "I don't know how useful the ICJ would be in the context of helping us move forward with climate change litigation. How can a country prove that extreme weather conditions in its boundaries are because of emissions in some industrialised country?"

Nevertheless, organisations such as Friends of the Earth International have begun exploring possibilities, both at the international and domestic law levels. At the national level in the US, there is the National Environmental Policy Act, which makes climate change impact assessment compulsory at the planning stage of a project. This means that companies skipping this assessment could be sued. It is now necessary to put in place laws and institutions that deal with climate change litigation at the international level.

This is particularly pertinent at a time when communities have begun to question the present basis of adaptation. "Why should we be told to adapt to climate change when we have not created the problem? Why should we become migrants when the greatest polluter, the US, is not ready to ratify the protocol?" asked a citizen of Fiji, a small island state in the Pacific ocean, during a CoP-8 side event.

She has a point, too

Developing country governments, however, haven't woken up to these resentments. They are waiting for funds to arrive. But as the World

Disaster Report 2002 points out, little is known about the costs of adaptation. Scientists and policy-makers put the worldwide cost at anything from tens to hundreds of billions of US dollars per year.

Industrialised countries, meanwhile, have found a way out of their commitments. "We are not directly involved in adaptation measures but contribute money to the Global Environment Facility, which carries out adaptation related activities," says Yvo de Boer, deputy director general, ministry of housing, spatial planning and the environment, Netherlands.

Here's a pittance

Another problem: a two per cent levy from the clean development mechanism (CDM), contributed to the adaptation fund. In real terms, this means taxing poor nations who are undertaking CDM projects. Why a two per cent levy only on CDM projects? Why not on joint implementation or emissions trading mechanisms?

Here's a solution

It is now clear that an adaptation fund alone will not be able to comprehensively deal with the issue of adaptation. There is a need to add teeth to the process through effective laws. Two things need to be ensured: contributions are not only voluntary, and they do not depend solely on political will. Communities affected by climate change should have a forum for redressal and compensation.

The CoP process is unlikely to take up this matter, for it hurts industrialised country interests. Developing countries have not been able to get their act together. The Kyoto Protocol has also failed to comprehensively address the issue of adaptation. Do we need a separate Adaptation Protocol?

Says an MEF official, "Parties are not ready to even look at such a proposal, how can you think of a separate protocol?" And he is not the only sceptic. "I think the UNFCCC provides enough scope for dealing with the issue of adaptation. We have done so much work on the Kyoto Protocol and Marrakech Accords. I think we need to consolidate our work on this front, and not think of another protocol. In any case it takes years before a protocol comes into shape," says Slade.

The point, though, is that issues such as adaptation and climate change cannot be dealt with in a few months or even years. As things stand today, developing countries do not gain from the adaptation discussions at CoP-8. It is time to rethink the adaptation principle, from a mere begging bowl approach, to a broad principle of polluters being held responsible for pollution. ■

Tuvalu, an island nation in the Pacific, is the perfect example of adverse impacts of climate change. Rising sea levels, resulting in floods, have changed life for the 10,000 citizens of this island. In the 1990s, Tuvalu also suffered seven cyclones. In 2001, the island was flooded for five consecutive months. The island was in the news last year when it announced plans to evacuate its citizens. But Tuvalu's proposal to relocate its citizens was rejected by Australia (whose per capita carbon dioxide emissions are 17.19 tonnes, as per the International Energy Agency, 2002). The island nation has now arranged a deal with New Zealand, whereby a number of its citizens would be accepted each year effectively as environmental refugees. The arrangement is projected for 30 to 50 years. In a desperate attempt, the prime minister of Tuvalu, Koloa Talake on March 5, 2002 announced plans to sue the world's worst greenhouse gas polluters at the International Court of Justice.



'You don't take friends to court'

Enele Sopoaga, Ambassador of Tuvalu to the UN, speaks on the complex relationship between Tuvalu and Australia. Excerpts:

...Islands are disappearing. Tuvalu is basically a ring of nine atolls, not more than two metres above sea level. There is a lagoon in the middle, which is surrounded by a chain of islands. Some of these islands — very small ones — have disappeared. The middle of the islands, where the people cultivate food crops and where they go for fresh water, is almost inhospitable because of the influx of salt water. Almost all our groundwater resources have been destroyed completely.

...Tuvalu has not yet taken any legal action against Australia and any other state party in the convention. There are options available — option to mitigate or to adapt. As regards legal action, Tuvalu is still investigating. The Tuvalu government is studying the possibility, technicality and legality of the issue. You should realise that these issues are very sensitive. Taking people to court is sensitive. You don't take your friends to court, do you?

...Australia is a very important country, not just for us, but also for all island countries in the Pacific. We all have very cordial relations with Australia. We would want to resolve the issue within the bilateral framework. Shifting this to another relationship or another

engagement is a difficult issue. That is why I said the Tuvalu government is exploring the possibilities.

...We hope that we will be able to explain things to the international community. Eventually, if these predictions were to come true, and if these predictions were not be heeded, then it will be a legal case. It amounts to denial of fundamental human rights. We are talking about our right to existence, we are dealing with our right to enjoy life freely, our human rights to expression, culture and to continuation of the basic traditions of our community; we are talking about sovereign rights to territory.

... See, you are in your house, living comfortably with your family, with your children. Somebody just comes and sprays gas into your house. Wouldn't this affect your human rights? Don't you think this is quite similar to global warming?

...There may be some straining of relationships, because Australia, despite being a close partner, is not ratifying the Kyoto Protocol. On the contrary, they are saying the sea level is not rising in Tuvalu. When you say all these things, it affects relationships. ■

History of a non-issue

The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), 1992

The text of the convention is deliberately vague on adaptation. Article 2 (objective) states clearly that the attempt will be to 'stabilise' greenhouse gas emissions in such a way as 'to allow ecosystems to adapt naturally to climate change' (emphasis added). In other words, that adaptation measures needn't be taken.

Article 4 (commitments) briefly mentions adaptation. Countries will inform on measures to facilitate adaptation to climate change; develop integrated plans to manage coastal zones, water resources and agriculture, and to protect areas affected by drought, desertification and floods, particularly in Africa.

It also identifies a few vulnerable groups like small island countries, countries with low-lying coastal areas, arid and semi-arid areas, forested areas, areas liable to forest decay, areas prone to natural disasters, areas liable to drought and desertification, and areas with fragile ecosystems. Countries highly dependent on fossil fuel production are also included. The convention calls on

industrialised countries to help in adaptation costs in developing countries, especially those vulnerable to adverse effects.

CoP-1, 1995

Low-lying and small island developing countries call for action but industrialised countries are reluctant to take on specific obligations because of the cost. The Berlin conference subsequently adopts a three-stage approach to deal with adaptation. In stage one, particularly vulnerable areas and appropriate policy options will be identified. Measures to prepare for adaptation will be taken in stage two, and in stage three, measures to actually facilitate adaptation, including insurance, will be carried out.

CoP-2, 1996

The ministerial session stresses the adverse social and economic impacts of climate change, particularly the impact on the agricultural sector. Small island states and African countries highlight their particular vulnerability and lack of technical and financial resources for prevention and adaptation. They call on the Global Environment Facility (GEF) to play an enabling role. Developing countries

ask to define funding requirements from GEF to implement the convention, including adaptation costs to adverse effects of climate change.

CoP-3, 1997

Article 3.14 of the Kyoto Protocol requires industrialised countries to meet their commitments in a way that minimises adverse social, environmental and economic impacts on developing countries.

Article 10 (b) elaborates on providing information on adaptation technologies and methods.

CoP-4, 1998

The Buenos Aires Plan of Action instructs GEF to fund adaptation measures in particularly vulnerable areas. Nothing comes out of this instruction for the next 3 years.

CoP-5, 1999

The conference manages to de-link the issue of funds for adaptation for small island states from compensation to oil producing states.

CoP-6, 2000

Industrialised countries want all financial assistance for adaptation to be channelled through GEF. The CoP-6

president Jan Pronk's proposes an adaptation fund under GEF, financed from a 2 per cent cut of proceeds from CDM. A levy is to be applied on joint implementation and emissions trading only if resources in 2005 are less than US \$1 billion. It also has a convention fund as a new window to GEF.

CoP-6 bis, 2001 and CoP-7, 2001

A special climate change fund and a separate fund for adaptation programmes in least developed countries is established under UNFCCC. The special climate change fund is not exclusively for adaptation. The decision states that these funds should be new and additional to those already being provided by GEF and through bilateral and multilateral sources.

Under the protocol, an adaptation fund is set up. A 2 per cent share from proceeds of CDM projects will contribute to this fund.

GEF is entrusted with the responsibility to operate all the funds established.

But still there is no assurance that developing countries will eventually get any funds from the North for their adaptation and other needs. ■



More cotton.

More sea-level rise

More oranges.

More droughts

More grapefruit.

More floods

More tomatoes.

More mosquitoes

More Sugar beet.

More famines

More Sorghum.

More extinctions

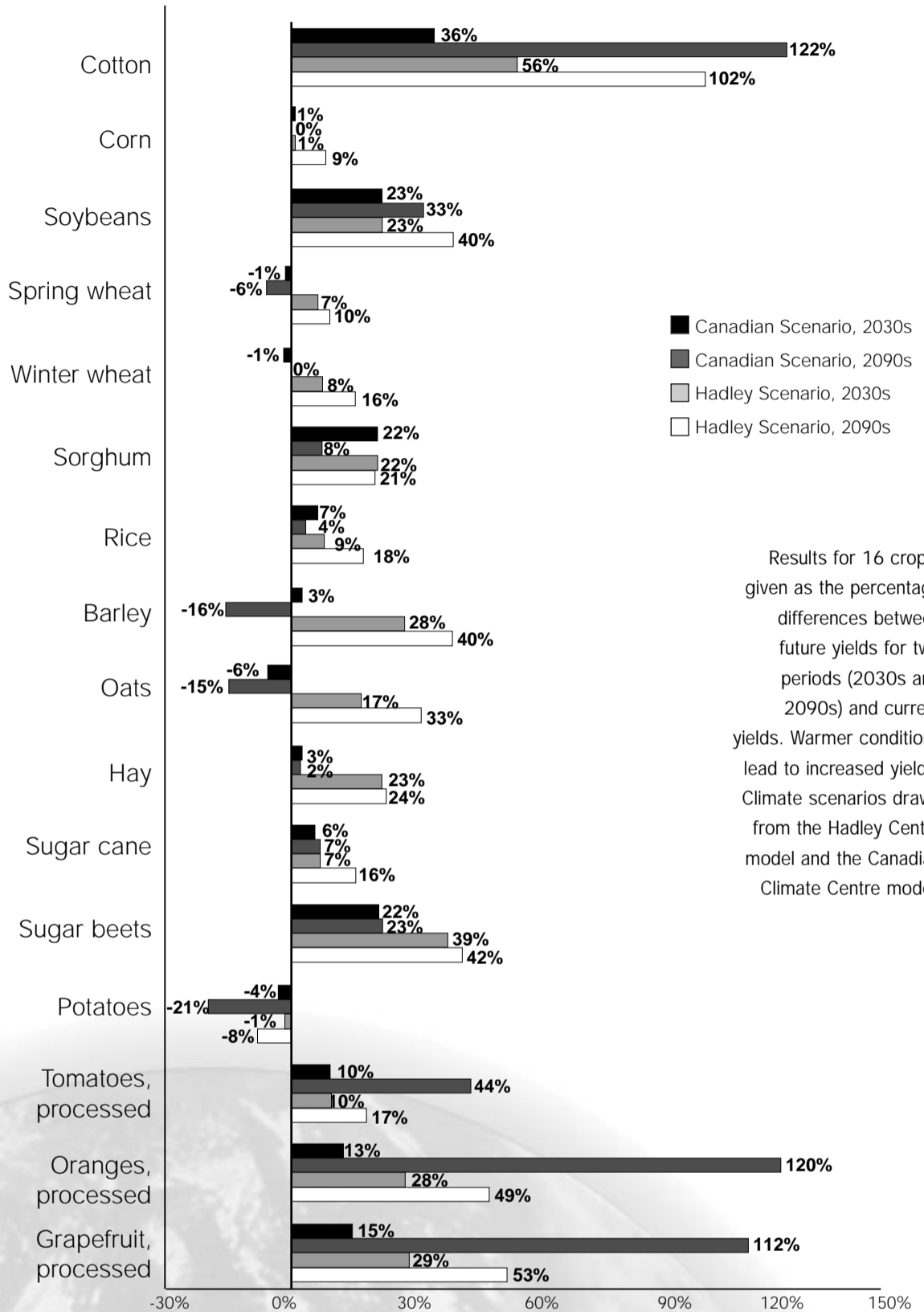
More Sugar cane.

More hurricanes

More Hay.

More refugees

Effects of potential changes in climate on US crop yields



Results for 16 crops, given as the percentage differences between future yields for two periods (2030s and 2090s) and current yields. Warmer conditions lead to increased yields. Climate scenarios drawn from the Hadley Centre model and the Canadian Climate Centre model.

Source: US Climate Action Report 2002, Global Change Research Programme, www.usgcrp.gov

SAVAGE HARVEST

We always knew the US was not interested in climate change negotiations. Now we know why.

Uncle Sam's cabin

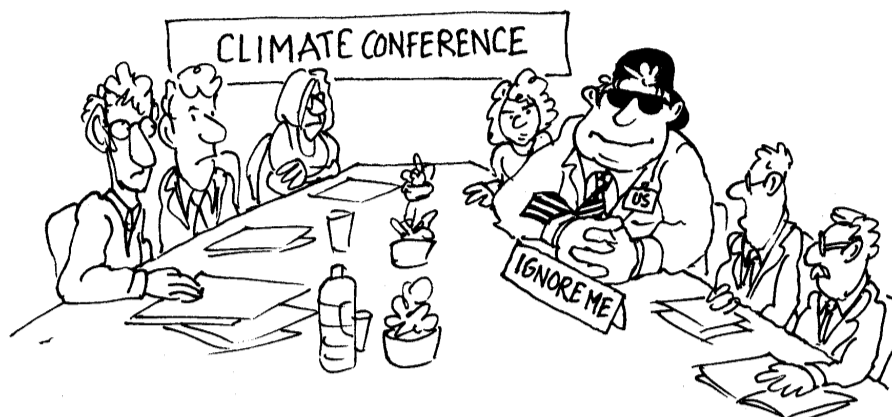
how to ensure Pax Americana

In international relations, the US likes to maintain what is called a 'leadership position'. It's a cornerstone of their foreign policy. Properly paranoid about leadership, the US can go to any length to keep the rest of the world kow-towing to them. So ensure Pax Americana.

Nothing else explains the noises the US has been making at CoP-8. First, they snarled at the Kyoto Protocol. Next, they began to purr about bilateral relationships. Now, it transpires, they not only want to keep whispering dangerous nothings into the ears of the Executive Board (EB) to the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM), but are actually yelling themselves hoarse about mitigating climate change in a way that runs outside of, parallel to, the CoP process.

The eminent Dr Watson, in his press statement early in the conference, threw elementary logic and 10 years of negotiations out of the window, grandiosely stating: "Rather than making drastic reductions in greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions that would put millions of Americans out of work and undermine our ability to make long-term investments in clean energy — as the Kyoto Protocol required — the President's growth-based approach will accelerate the development of new technologies and encourage partnerships on climate change issues with the developing world."

After this announcement —



arrogant, isolationist, and typically Uncle Sam — which clearly showed the US was interested in taking a different tack to climate change, the US delegation quickly got down to hard-selling "the President's new growth approach". On October 30, they met Indian foreign ministry officials at Hyderabad House. India was asked to forget the Kyoto Protocol, and sign up for bilateral relations to tackle the issue. Indian officials haven't responded. But since Indian industry is completely gung-ho about the carbon market (in an interview to *Equity Watch*, K P Nyati, head of the environment management division, Confederation of Indian Industry, said: "the US has proposed bilateral projects. And if such schemes are able to mitigate GHG emissions...the entrepreneurs would still go for them."), and they do wield influence with the present government, India might well tow the line in

the future. Worrying, to say the least.

But we were talking about Uncle Sam. At CoP-8, a very interesting development occurred. Publicly, the US went all out against the protocol. It would never ever ratify it, they said. In so doing, it lost eligibility to participate in EB meetings. So privately, it went on a diplomatic blitzkrieg and managed to blaze its way into the EB. The rules about who could or couldn't attend EB meetings were hitherto vague, but could be interpreted to mean that only those countries that had ratified the protocol had the right to attend EB meetings as observers. The US managed to incorporate a minor but crucial amendment: from now on, any country that was a 'party' to the UNFCCC, but not to the Kyoto Protocol, could attend.

Many Southern delegates and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) were surprised at this turn of

events. The US had been lobbying for a seat in EB meetings for the past year, ever since it first announced its decision to pull out of the protocol in March 2001. Why did it now want only observer status? The US strategy here is clear, and horrendous. It is out of the protocol, but still wants to meddle in its workings. Talk about paranoia.

NGOs also wonder if there might be a larger gameplan behind the bilateral bandwagon the US is inviting developing countries to jump in. The US will be the common denominator in all these agreements. Could it, therefore, herd all these countries into a single bloc in the future, thus creating a parallel structure to the Kyoto Protocol?

Certainly looks that way. There are strong rumours the US is willing to foot a part of the bill for the Third World Conference on Climate Change (WCCC), to be held in Moscow in September–October 2003. Just before CoP-9. The chairperson of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Yuri A Izrael, also known to be a 'climate change sceptic' is one of the organisers of the conference. It could well be that the WCCC, one of the largest congregations of climate and environmental scientists outside the UNFCCC system, might be the forum where Uncle Sam holds forth, blustering about global freedom, democracy and the rule of law in his usual equivocating fashion. ■

After 2012

diplomatic hell breaks loose right now

Developing countries are worried, with good reason, that they will be dragged into discussions, and eventually negotiations, to take on commitments that exceed those agreed upon in UNFCCC. Throughout CoP-8, developed countries kept up intense pressure on developing countries' commitments through repeated insinuations in speeches and statements.

Countries such as Denmark and Australia were blunt. The head of the Australian delegation said in the Round Table session, "What was needed was a 50-60 per cent reduction by the end of the century, and for this all countries need to take action, including developing countries." A delegate from Denmark said, "Discussions on what will happen after 2012 has to

start, and some developing countries need to start thinking of engaging in measures to mitigate greenhouse gases (GHGs)."

But G77 and China are putting up a strong fight. They have made it quite clear that they are not willing to take on new commitments. Indian prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee also came out strongly in his speech to the conference: "Suggestions to commence a process to enhance commitments of developing countries on mitigating climate change beyond that included in the convention are misplaced." He stressed that India's per capita GHG emissions were only a fraction of the world average, and far below that of developed countries.

The head of the Saudi Arabian delegation was just as, if not more,

forceful: "We will not agree to any language or code words, such as further action concerning developing country commitments."

These reactions formed the crux of wrangling between developed and developing countries at a contact group meeting negotiating an 'improved text'. (The 'improved text' is a set of guidelines to help industrialising countries prepare their 'national communications', or emissions information.) Its formulation was a sticky issue at CoP-8. Developed countries wanted more detailed guidelines. Developing countries, for their part, were wary that stringent guidelines would force them to provide inventoried data on GHG emissions, which could then be used to force commitments on them.

Of course, developing countries had an ace up their sleeve, too. Developed countries could show leadership by meeting their commitments first. To begin with, they could ratify the protocol. Wasn't it ironic that countries such as Australia, which hadn't even ratified the protocol, were demanding developing countries to

take on commitments?

Developed countries are also yet to meet their commitments on financing and technology transfer. The Special Climate Change Fund and the Least Developed Countries Fund is yet to be made operational. "Access to technology for renewable energy will also help check the emissions of developing countries. I point this out because developed countries are so concerned about the emissions of developing countries," stressed Emily Massawa, a delegate from Kenya.

Although there is a need to review commitments for future commitment periods, the process should start with developed countries. Vajpayee stressed this point. "This would bring additional strain on the already fragile economies of developing countries, and will affect our efforts to achieve higher growth rates and eradicate poverty." It does seem premature to ask countries that do not even have adequate resources to meet their basic human needs to deal with climate change by taking on commitments. ■

Bear with me

Russia is careening wildly in a Kyoto Protocol ratification storm. But she refuses to be blown away. Not only that, she wants to turn other countries' desperation — to see the protocol ratified — to her own advantage.

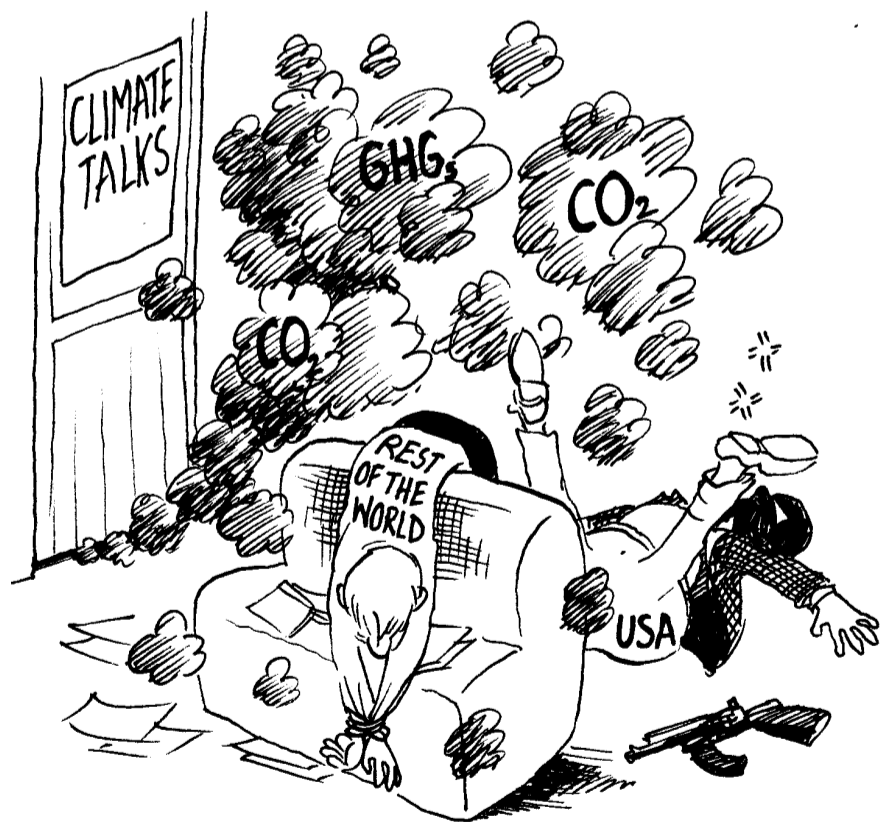
Yesterday at CoP-8, Russia came up with a clear demand for compensation. Alexander Kosarikov, deputy chairperson, Committee of Ecology, State Duma of Russia (Lower House of Parliament), said that a major part of the world's forests and freshwater existed in Russia. These had to be, in the interests of the world's ecology and climate change mitigation, protected. Kosarikov said Russia was doing exactly that, but was also shelling out US \$2 million a year. It was getting too expensive, he seemed to imply. So couldn't the world get together and put up some money? Not as charity, mind you. But as compensation. "A part of the sovereign debt could be considered through means such as debt-swaps and other mechanisms," Kosarikov said.

The storm's been brewing in the climate change tea cup for quite a while now. First, everybody thought that the protocol would be ratified by the year 2000. That didn't happen. Then everybody smacked their lips and said: wait till WSSD (September 2002); it will happen. It didn't. That's

when the milk got a little sour, and the brew began to swirl. With countries like Canada and Australia wriggling out of ratification pressures (how do they manage it?), Russia swung into focus. She could be put under pressure, given her current economic weakness and lack of political leverage in international affairs. Given this context, Kosarikov's statement is clearly an attempt to come out trumps in a bad situation.

It's also an attempt to parry away the ratification question. Kosarikov needs to do that, for its not going to be easy for Russia to ratify the protocol. Not every parliamentarian in the 9 parties that comprise the Russian Parliament today supports such a move. The process has begun, but leaders are worried about risks — especially in the energy sector. However, Kosarikov says that the essence of the protocol needs to be explained to them, as also the fact that there's more in it for Russia than the legislators think.

A lot of debate is expected on this in the Russian Parliament. All this makes ratification difficult. As Kosarikov put it, "It is also unclear as to when the ratification process will be completed." For the Kyoto Protocol to come into force by the next Conference of Parties, Russia has to ratify the pact before September 1, 2003. ■



A SUCCESSFUL END TO THE HOSTAGE CRISIS
AT THE CLIMATE CHANGE CONFERENCE.

RINGSIDE VIEW

ANDREW SIMMS



Who owes whom?

In the last decade, the rich world and its financial institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have been dragged into giving debt relief to poor countries. Begrudging every dollar, a small, inadequate amount of relief has finally been given, but with strings attached. The attitude of the rich has been that of a hard-pressed philanthropist, called on to help their incompetent poor relations.

But the rich protested too much, and now they are in a lethal debt crisis of their own. On January 2, as a family in the US sits down to have their evening meal, they would have already used per person, the equivalent of, in fossil fuel terms, as much a family in Tanzania will need year-round. In a world that needs huge reductions in greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions every day, the rich by using up more than their fair share of the atmosphere are running up an enormous ecological debt. This has implications not only for what will happen from 2008 in the next phase of the climate convention, but in all rich and poor country negotiations for balance in the global economy.

A quick look at the climate accounts shows a world turned upside down. Imagine if a hard-working Indian citizen came home after a long day's work looking forward to rest, and finds his house crammed with 20 US citizens, a dozen Europeans, a handful of Australians, Canadians and Japanese. The Indian will be barely able to move. Add to that — the uninvited guests leaving taps and gas running. This is what has happened to the atmosphere today.

The rich have occupied all the available environmental space leaving behind no room for others to live in. Because the global economy is still fuelled by coal, oil and gas, the ecological debt can be given an illustrative economic value. It runs into trillions of US dollars. Conversely, the least developed countries that take up far less than their logical share of atmospheric space have ecological credits that dwarf their conventional financial debts. The world, and the CoPs have so far failed to produce an accounting system that even recognises ecological debt. It is not surprising. The shame of having abused the global commons of the atmosphere would quickly strip away the veneer and smug sense of economic efficiency and moral authority that industrialised countries carry with them to every international meeting.

So now is the time to think ahead. And ask how the true picture of reckless ecological debtors on one hand, and suffering ecological creditors on the other, can be reflected in the next climate negotiations.

To start with, new resources have to be made available to deal with the immediate damages in poor countries, caused by an unstable climate. Instead of the insultingly small sums promised by the Global Environment Facility, it should be equivalent to the costs of adaptation imposed on developing countries by climate change. Given the readiness of the rich to pour hundreds of billions of US dollars into funding conflict, they cannot claim that the money is not available. But, perhaps more important is building reconciliation for ecological debt into an effective and forward-looking successor to the Kyoto Protocol.

The Centre for Science and Environment introduced the concept of equity into climate talks over a decade ago. Ten years on equity is an essential component of any new framework for climate that has logic, environmental integrity and political realism.

No global deal will work without setting a concentrated target for GHGs in the atmosphere. When the emissions budget is worked out, the international community must decide how to share it. The fundamental choice is between equity — the atmosphere is a global commons, which no one owns and we all need — and a carbon aristocracy where the accident of geographical birthright would give a minority a bigger share. Once a constitutional framework is agreed at, the question is — how quickly the international community can negotiate the timeframe to make equal entitlements a reality. More than anything else, recognising the ecological debt crisis must give us the political energy to shrink and share the carbon cake. If we fail, there looms the prospect of an environmentally bankrupt world in our lifetime.

Andrew Simms is policy director of the New Economics Foundation, UK.