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ENVIRONMENT: FEARS AND HOPES OF THE ISLANDS

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Just as some islands of the Pacific fear about going under in the face of rising sea level, most of these islands fought long and hard against their voices being drowned amidst the noises of promises and trade offs when the world met in Europe for negotiations over climate change.

At stake for the 192 members of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) is a new international agreement on reducing carbon emissions that needs to be signed and ready when the current treaty, the Kyoto Protocol, expires in 2012.

For 22% of UNFCCC members however, the stakes are much higher; having their small islands swarmed by the encroaching ocean is no longer a question of whether it will happen but when this will take place.

These countries are members of AOSIS, the Alliance of Small Islands States, an organisation of 43 islands states that include the 14 independent countries of the Pacific.

Pulling their weights, the Pacific islands through AOSIS made sure the UNFCCC negotiations in Poznan, Poland, December 1-12, 2008, heard their positions loud and clear.

Whether the world, the industrialised countries classified under Kyoto as Annex One countries in particular heard them, is another matter.

Right from day one of UNFCCC, AOSIS set emission reduction goals many commentators labelled as ambitious.

Annex One countries, the Alliance demanded, should reduce their carbon emissions by as high as 40% from their 1990 levels by 2020 and 95% by 2050, as such deep and rapid cuts would limit global temperature rise to no more than 1.5 degrees Celsius.

“The avoidance of climate change impacts on small islands developing states (SIDS) must be one of the key benchmarks for assessing the appropriateness of any long-term goal,” said the AOSIS submission to the Poznan negotiations.

“The long-term global goal must be sufficient to ensure that long-term temperature increases are stabilised well below 1.5°C.

“A 2°C increase compared to pre-industrial levels would have devastating consequences on SIDS due to resulting sea level rise, coral bleaching, coastal erosion,

changing precipitation patterns, increased incidence and re-emergence of climate related diseases and the impacts of increasingly frequent and severe weather events.”

AOSIS is of course basing its proposed reduction targets on the latest report of the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change—comprising world renowned scientists and authorities on climate change—which declared that a temperature rise of 2°C would be catastrophic for small, low-lying lands including islands.

Such a temperature won't be reached, the IPCC predicted, if carbon emissions are reduced by 25% to 40% from the 1990 levels.

Other parties including Annex One countries advocate more modest reduction cuts.

Countries which are members of the European Union for instance, propose emission reduction targets between 25% to 30% from 1990 levels for its 27-member nations.

Some like Australia offer much lesser concessions of 5% reduction.

Of the greatest concerns to these wealthier economies was the cost of such reductions, compounded in many ways by the fact that amongst the heavy polluters are countries currently classified as developing.

China and India are frequently flagged as classic examples and because of their classifications, the two countries are not expected to undergo such drastic carbon emission reductions like their developed neighbours.

This dilemma was one of many cross cutting issues that negotiators had to grapple with throughout the two week-long UNFCCC negotiations.

Another highly charged issue is the transfer of capital and technology from the richer to the not-so-rich countries that needed to happen as part of the UNFCCC's adaptation to climate change provisions.

Developing economies that include members of AOSIS complain that Annex One countries are dragging their feet over such transfers which they had promised to do at the Bali climate change negotiations in 2007.

Entrenched positions by countries which belong to the bloc called the Group of 77 plus China do not help either, especially the position advocated by members which also belong to OPEC (the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries).

OPEC members of G77 plus China want to access adaptation funds also, protesting that any push to reduce fossil fuel use in favour of clean and renewable energy will adversely affect their economies too.

Contentious too has been the perception that the Global Environment Facility (GEF)'s administering of the Least Developed Countries' Fund is too bureaucratic and that application procedures tend to be long winded and complex.

“I heard 15 negative statements about the Least Developed Countries Fund (LDCF),” protested GEF’s senior programme manager Boni Biagini.

“Most of the comments were on the time taken to raise funds for LDCF.

“I was only able to fundraise for implementation last year (2007) after the national adaptation programme of action (NAPA) was established.

“Why are they saying its eight years, that’s not true, its only taken two years and now I have raised US\$200 million grants for LDCF,” said Biagini.

Pacific members of AOSIS have their own issues to deal with too.

Papua New Guinea and Tuvalu for instance were not seeing eye-to-eye over a carbon trading initiative the former is heavily promoting referred to as Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation (REDD).

“I can see why Tuvalu will be interested in arguing that REDD will let the industrialised nations off the hook because of the credits that might be available. But then you also have the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) and other credit mechanisms that are both private and voluntary that are available around the world,” argued Ambassador Robert Aisi, PNG’s Permanent Representative to the United Nations in New York.

“We respect Tuvalu’s position but we will not be seen to be attacking another Pacific brother in a plenary session.”

Actually Tuvalu’s contribution to the UNFCCC negotiations in Poland was disproportionate to its size.

Though one of the tiniest countries of the Pacific, Tuvalu was a giant in the negotiations and this was mainly due to the experience and skills of its climate change adviser, Dr Ian Fry of Australia.

Tuvalu Prime Minister Apisai Ielemia was one of only four heads of government that spoke at the main ministerial session.

He almost brought the roof of the auditorium down as delegates including United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon gave him a rousing standing ovation in response to his emotional plea that Tuvaluans would not accept defeat on climate change.

“It is our belief that Tuvalu as a nation has a right to exist forever,” Ielemia told the conference. We are not contemplating migration.”

UNFCCC in Poznan seemed to have taken up a proposal of AOSIS that was raised by Dr Fry over changes to the status of the Adaptation Fund Board.

“At Poznan, the finishing touches were put to the Kyoto Protocol’s adaptation fund thereby enabling the fund to receive projects in the course of 2009,” said a press statement announcing the outcome of UNFCCC Poznan.

“Parties agreed that the fund (CDM) fed by a share of proceeds from the Kyoto Protocol’s clean development mechanism and voluntary contributions would have a legal capacity granting developing countries’ direct access.”

Another outcome of Poznan, according to the statement, was agreement in the contentious area of technology transfer.

“Progress was made in the area of technology with the endorsement of the Global Environmental Facility’s “Poznan Strategic Programme on Technology Transfer.

“The aim of this programme is to scale up the level of investment by leveraging private investments that developing countries require for mitigation and adaptation technologies.”

After Poznan, the next step UNFCCC said would be “crafting a concrete negotiating text.”

Negotiators agreed that such a text should be finalised by the next UN climate change conference in Copenhagen in December with three negotiation sessions planned to take place in Bonn, Germany, before that.

Whether the final text will accommodate the fears and hopes of the little islands of the Pacific, those following these highly intense negotiations tend to believe the islands should brace for the worst.

Samisoni Pareti covered UNFCCC in Poznan as part of a Pacific Communications Team put together by the Samoa-based Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environmental Programme, SPREP.

Source: Island Business