

HOW TO CUT EMISSIONS

Martin Khor

A United Nations meeting on climate change in Vienna has recognized recent scientific data by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change that global emissions of Greenhouse Gases should reach its peak within the next 10 to 15 years, and it then needs to decline to very low levels - well below half the levels in 2000 by the middle of this century, in order to prevent dangerous global warming.

The meeting on 27-31 August, under the UN Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in effect started a negotiation on how much the developed countries will have to commit to cut their emissions, in order to avoid a catastrophic warming of the world's temperature.

After several days of negotiations, a working group of the Convention in August agreed to initially consider an emission reduction range of 25 - 40% below 1990 levels by 2020 for developed countries.

An earlier proposal championed by the European Union to already adopt this range as a target was rejected by other developed countries, including Japan, Canada and Russia. The real battle on actual commitments will thus take place later.

The Vienna meeting was a prelude to a full meeting of the UNFCCC and its Kyoto Protocol in Bali on 3-11 December. The Bali meeting will be a crucial milestone in getting countries to commit to combat climate change in the period after 2012, when the present phase of the Protocol expires.

The climate issue has gained great international prominence following three reports launched this year by a panel of over a thousand scientists detailing how the present trends in emissions of carbon dioxide and other gases will lead to a significant increase in temperatures, causing sea level rise, melting of glaciers, floods, drought and agricultural decline.

The global mean temperature has already risen by 0.74 degrees centigrade between 1906 and 2005. It is now widely believed that if the temperature rises by more than 2 degrees above pre-industrial levels, there would be catastrophic effects. With present trends, the temperature will increase by 3 to 6 degrees or more, threatening life on Earth.

To limit temperature rise to 2 degrees, the concentration of Greenhouse Gases in the atmosphere has to be limited to 450 parts per million (ppm) of carbon dioxide equivalent.

The people of the planet earth are already very near this danger level, thus the urgency of reaching an agreement to cut emissions as fast and as much as possible.

One major impediment is the understandable fear of developing countries that reducing their emissions, or even slowing their emission growth, may be at the expense of their economies, if this is not accompanied by sufficient and timely upgrading and changing of technology.

Only developed countries are presently bound to reduce their emissions, due to their historical responsibility, higher emissions and capacity to change. But

they are now pressing some developing countries to also commit in a new post-2012 regime.

The per capita Greenhouse Gas emissions of developing countries are still relatively low, averaging about 4 tons of carbon dioxide equivalent compared to the 16 tons average of developed countries in 2004. In terms of carbon dioxide emissions alone, the US level is about 20 tons per capita, Canada and Australia 18 tons, Germany and Japan 10, China 3, India 1 ton, and African countries below 1.

Most developing countries are resisting being placed under legal obligations to limit their emissions, arguing that this would be unfair since their per capita emissions are still far below the industrial countries' levels and that they have the right to more emission growth to enable development.

In Vienna, the European Union proposed targets that global emissions be cut by 50% and developed countries' emissions be cut by 60-80 per cent by 2050 compared to 1990.

Although there was no explicit target for developing countries, in fact there is an implicit target for them. Since developed and developing countries each account for about half of the total global emissions, a 70% cut for developed countries implies a 30% cut for developing countries (given a global cut of 50%).

Since population will roughly double between 1990 and 2050, this would also imply a 65% reduction of per capita emissions in developing countries, on the whole.

That is a very steep cut. The recent scientific reports explain that the required emission reductions can be made at little cost, with economic growth rates reducing by only 0.12% a year.

But as pointed out by a participant at the Vienna meeting, it would be a tremendous challenge to show how developing countries can maintain economic growth rates of, say, 6% a year and still be able to reduce their emissions per capita by 65% in that period.

The climate issue is shaping up to be not only the biggest environmental but also the biggest economic issue of modern times. The amount of emissions a country is allowed to have in future will influence its method of production and level of economic output.

Thus, the commitments to be made by rich and poorer nations will also influence the future division of incomes in the world.

There is rising awareness in developing countries that they will suffer most from climate change and thus they have a stake in a strong regime to curb emissions. But they also want justice—that developed countries that were most responsible for the pollution have to reduce, while poorer countries can still increase their emissions, up to a point.

The German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, made a path-breaking statement during her recent Asia visit, agreeing to a “per capita” approach, in which the rich countries have to reduce and poor nations can increase their per capita emissions until both sides reach a similar per capita emission level to be determined.

This position is unlikely to win over countries like the United States for now. But it is a very good start for a developed country leader. The run-up to Bali and the Bali meeting itself will be crucial in the global politics of climate change. □□

—Third World Network Features

