

Bali and After

THE KYOTO PROTOCOL FAILED because America and to a certain extent Europe refused to compromise on their life styles and agree to keep greenhouse gas emissions at a reasonable level. Barring Germany no government in Europe expressed its willingness to sincerely do something in saving the climate change agenda as formulated, after prolonged discussions, at Kyoto. Though a consensus, after a number of compromises, emerged at the recently held UN climate change conference at Bali, Indonesia, the UN-brokered greenhouse gas emission charter is unlikely to take off because America, Europe and Japan—the absolute polluters of the world—continue to locate the danger of global warming in emerging economies like India and China, albeit on a per capita basis India is not one of the big polluters. Despite some hectic industrial activities in Asia in recent years due to outsourcing of some industries traditionally located in the West, developing economies do much less environmental damage than do the industrially advanced ones. America and West Europe have already consumed their future but they are now asking the third world poor to pay the price. In the wake of the Bali summit a new UN report on the state of the world's environment warned of the dangers of climate change and its disastrous impact on human beings and animal species.

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) report known as GEO-4 in short is the most comprehensive UN report on the environment, prepared by about 390 experts and reviewed by more than 1,000 others across the world.

The massive report gives details on past trends and future prospects on the atmosphere, pollution, food, biodiversity, water and inequality in the world. And the picture is grim.

Since 1987 there have been some achievements, but they are far outweighed by the deteriorating situation. The good news is that the environment is now much closer to mainstream politics everywhere and some straightforward problems are being tackled.

Failure to address these persistent problems may undo all the achievements so far on the simpler issues, and may threaten humanity's survival, says UNEP.

"But, as GEO-4 points out, there continue to be 'persistent' and intractable problems unresolved and unaddressed. Past issues remain and new ones are emerging—from the rapid rise of oxygen 'dead zones' in the oceans to the resurgence of new and old diseases linked in part with environmental degradation".

On climate change the report says the threat is now so urgent that large cuts in greenhouse gases by mid-century are needed.

Another problem is unsustainable consumption—people are living beyond their means. The resources needed to sustain the world's population exceed what is available.

"Humanity's footprint (its environmental demand) is 21.9ha per person while the Earth's biological capacity is, on average, only 15.7ha per person," says GEO-4.

The crisis includes climate change, extinction of species, hunger, decline of fish stocks, loss of fertile land through degradation, unsustainable pressure on resources; dwindling amount of fresh water and the risk that environmental damage could pass 'unknown points of no return'.

Whether the Bali consensus can generate response from the big polluters is a big question. All indications are that their response is woefully inadequate and people find a remarkable lack of urgency on their part. □□□