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*The climate summit seems headed for a deadlock, with the developing countries opposing a regime of emission cuts and the developed countries choosing to downplay their role in global warming. However, differentiated responsibility should continue to be the guiding principle, says N. R. KRISHNAN.*

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The course of climate talks had never been smooth. And now, with the hardening positions of the developed and developing countries on almost all vital points of the negotiations, the outcome of the forthcoming Summit (December 7-18) in Copenhagen hangs in a balance. Events of the last two weeks marked by a flurry of exchanges between the principal players have cast a shadow on the possibility of arriving at even a modest "political agreement" at the Danish capital.

#### CONFUSION PREVAILS

Guided by the concourse so far, it would appear that the developed nations are pushing for a political agreement among all on the need to contain global warming to not more than 2 degrees Celsius, with the industrialising economies (China, India, South Africa, Brazil and Mexico) accepting a targeted reduction of their Greenhouse Gas emissions from "business as usual" levels starting from the year 2020, with the long-term goal of halving them by 2050.

There would be other requirements, like the need for these economies to reach a peak of their emissions not later than the period 2015 to 2020 and reducing them from then on to reach the 50 per cent goal. As for the developed countries themselves, their position has been left nebulous on key issues like the continuance or otherwise of the Kyoto Protocol, volume of their assistance to the developing countries to take up mitigation and adaptation measures and transfer of necessary technology with all its attendant Intellectual Property Rights obligations.

Going by the known position of the G-77 and China and reiterated by them at the meetings of officials in Bangkok ( September 28-October 9) and Barcelona (November 2-6), any agreement on the above lines will be totally unacceptable to them. The recent Beijing meeting of ministers of Brazil, South Africa, India and China (BASIC) and attended by Sudan (leader of the G-77 and China), has come out with a strong restatement of the collective position of the group. China and India have declared their commitment to contribute positively to global efforts by announcing voluntary emission reductions. In the process, an attempt would be made to reduce the carbon intensities of their growth . India has made public the array of methods by which it proposes to address the problem.

Given the above background, it's anybody's guess as to what would happen at Copenhagen. The present hiatus paves the way for activists and intellectuals to jump in to lend a touch of emotion, anger and sophistry to persuade the two sides to see reason and be collegiate. Is not the planet in peril?

#### ECONOMIC JUSTIFICATION

What the activists, young, old and middle-aged, would do is predictable, as is well known and demonstrated in the past. But what needs a close look is the argument of the economists who rationalise sacrifice by all to save the global commons. Economic efficiency is their key expression. In their characteristic approach, they identify the GHG levels in the atmosphere and their continuing build-up as falling into 'stocks' and 'flows'.

'Stocks' are historical accumulations for which the developed countries are indeed responsible. But 'flows' are contributed by both the developed and developing countries, particularly the fast industrialising ones among the latter. Since the accumulations will get destroyed only over a long time by the forces of nature and chemistry, human action would be of no avail. The 'flows' can, however, be checked by active human intervention. Hence, all countries should share the burden of compulsory mitigation.

How do countries share the burden? Of course, on the basis of their annual total emissions. Applying economics a little further, the most efficient way of effecting reductions is to follow the least cost principle. That is, those who can reduce more economically than others should oblige by being more generous in their actions than those who cannot. To be sure, rewards await the former on earth and in heaven.

Economic efficiency, as preached, clearly ignores equity and some of its own tenets. Reducing emissions means reducing dependence on fossil fuels and hence reduced energy availability and economic growth. At least in the short run, in the absence of adequate supplies of clean energy at cost effective terms, this result is sure to follow. Poor nations would end up losers.

#### DIFFERENTIATED RESPONSIBILITY

This does not mean that the poor, and that too the better off among them, should do nothing to combat climate change. They have their "differentiated responsibility". And this is precisely what China, India, Brazil and South Africa have undertaken to discharge. The "low hanging fruits" for them are, for instance, promoting energy efficiency and energy saving, demand and supply management including pricing of energy, sustainable industrial and business practices like 'reduce, recycle and reuse' and mass transport as opposed to personal modes. These efforts would be supplemented by enhancing reliance on clean energy. The methods and timeframes of the rich and the poor to move to an era of low carbon economy should vary. That's sound economics and equity.

One point put forward by the developed world to lend urgency to act is the scientific evidence on the need for immediate action. This is accompanied by exaggerated statements on the impacts of global warming. This is an unabashed misuse of science as an instrument of intimidation. Even well-intentioned statements, cautions the UK Met Office, "distort the science and could undermine efforts to tackle carbon emissions". This may explain the results of a recent poll conducted by the PEW Centre in the US in which well over 50 per cent of those polled gave a low priority to global warming as an issue of importance.

If some amount of global warming is inevitable due to past actions, then the world can only get ready to adapt itself to the change and its attendant fallout. The poor are the victims of the change already ushered in and would continue to be so. This, then, is the setting in which the Copenhagen talks begin. Like the wistful mermaid on the city's waterfront, the world longs for a happy ending.

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