

ISSUE OF THE WEEK



A puddle of water in front of a coal power station of the energy group Evonik near the western German city of Herne, on December 9.

[AFP]

Water security must be on the Copenhagen agenda

BY PROFESSOR GIORGOS TSAKIRIS*

The Copenhagen world climate summit organized by the United Nations is taking place with the aim of agreeing on a successor to the Kyoto Protocol. The talks in Copenhagen are widely viewed as the last chance for humanity to curb soaring carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gas emissions which are blamed for global climate change.

International research centers and scientific committees have shown that due to increasing emissions, sea levels will rise and temperature and precipitation patterns will be substantially disturbed in many parts of the world. Some recent reports include projections that are truly frightening. If they are confirmed, by the end of this century, they will create very adverse conditions jeopardizing life and development in most parts of the world. Extreme events will multiply, causing natural catastrophes along with widespread poverty and disease.

The results of climate change will hit the developing countries hardest due to their high vulnerability to these changes and their very fragile environments and economic weaknesses.

The principal negotiators appear to support views that do not merge into a single, conclusive line. To some extent negotiators still lack global thinking and come to talks eager to support their country's interests. Blocs of countries, as expected, are still far from a binding treaty at the December summit in Copenhagen.

Obviously, various interests are at stake in the climate talks in Copenhagen. Environmental groups, companies and states seem to have conflicting views. Companies conceive global change as a new opportunity for boosting earnings. Industrialized states fear negative impacts for their welfare systems, whereas coun-

tries with booming production are seriously considering the possible negative effects on their rates of growth. Influential environmental groups from the north are seeking cuts in emissions regardless of the individual status of each country.

What seems logical to expect at this stage is that talks will be based on the previous agreement which was signed by 186 countries and commits all the world's rich nations (except the US) to cut gas emissions. However, as is clear from last week's news reports, the views of a number of diplomats indicate reluctance to accept even the basics of the Kyoto Protocol.

Although current US policy on climate issues is more flexible and promising than in the past, it seems that, due to internal difficulties on the one hand and the interests of industry on the other, it is most probable that US diplomats will continue with the rhetoric in favor of a non-binding loose agreement and avoid tackling some hot issues. As for the other players – China, India, the G7 and the EU – it often appears that they still do not share the same principles.

There are several political games being played between the major players, particularly regarding whether the new treaty should be binding or not, what level of reduction of gas emissions will be decided, how this reduction will be allocated between the countries etc. Although all these questions are important for the future of the planet, there are some additional important issues which should be also addressed. These include: a) how the rich nations will support developing countries to combat climate change and its impacts; and b) how to lower the consumption of natural resources and commodities in the developed world.

Regarding the former, all the rich nations should acknowledge their respon-

sibility since they are responsible for the vast majority of accumulated greenhouse gases. Rich countries should help developing countries adapt to the new adverse conditions. In this context, EU leaders have agreed to pay a share into a global fund that would amount to \$100 billion annually by 2020. Although this was a promising move, the same leaders have not yet clarified the size of the contribution from public funds, to the disappointment of UN officials. However, regardless of certain internal disagreements, the EU seems to be heading toward an agreement through a structured dialogue under the umbrella of the UN, which is undoubtedly the most appropriate forum for these talks. This may be seen as an achievement, especially when compared to other strong players, for example the US and China, which are pursuing somewhat obscure bilateral negotiations.

As far as consumption in the industrialized world is concerned, there is an urgent need for all parties to accept the fact that this is one of the major causes of the deterioration of global conditions. It is also the reason why poor nations increase production for their rich counterparts, using high carbon technologies that destroy their environment and contribute to global warming.

In talks held in Limassol, Cyprus, last June, during the General Assembly of the European Water Resources Association (EWRA), it was concluded that European scientists should be more insistent on issues relating to climate change and water resources which affect rich and poor countries alike. In short, these issues include "Global Water Security," "Mitigation and Adaptation" and "Transboundary Cooperation."

European water scientists are today sending their message to diplomats ne-

Running dry
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gotiating at Copenhagen that a just agreement for the poor nations should be reached. Water security will be the key issue in the coming years, since climate change is expected to affect water availability and water quality patterns in a large number of countries that are already facing acute water problems. Serious droughts and catastrophic floods will pose an increasing threat to the vulnerable systems of the poor countries.

World leaders should promote programs funded by rich countries for assessing the impacts of climate change, for preparedness plans for facing natural disasters (including early warning systems) and for the transfer of knowledge and adaptation technologies in various sectors (agriculture, forestry, energy, fisheries and aquaculture). Particular attention should be given to water scarcity problems, which are expected to be even more destructive for the societies of the developing countries. Water is a central issue and should be addressed directly at the Copenhagen talks. Global water security is already at risk with or without climate change.

In order to help poor nations prevent catastrophes involving their resources, several "soft" activities should also be promoted such as networking and facilitating access to the information systems and technological innovations of the industrialized world. As far as this issue is concerned, the scientific community has its own responsibility.

In the hope that a binding new treaty will be signed in Copenhagen, the European Water Resources Association is sending a clear message to all participants: "Think globally – act now."

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