

No Consensus Reached at UN Climate Change Conference in Poland

By Jodie Hierlmeier
Staff Counsel
Environmental Law Centre

The annual United Nations (UN) Climate Change conference took place in Poznań, Poland, December 1-12, 2008. The conference included the 14th Conference of the Parties (COP 14) to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the 4th Meeting of Parties to the Kyoto Protocol (MOP 4).

Although the primary focus of the conference was the post-2012 period, when current Kyoto targets are set to expire, the meetings wrapped up with few concrete commitments and lots of work left for 2009.

Background on the UNFCCC and Kyoto Protocol

The international political response to climate change began with the adoption of the UNFCCC in 1992. The UNFCCC sets out a framework for action aimed at stabilizing atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases (GHGs) to avoid "dangerous anthropogenic interference" with the climate system. The UNFCCC entered into force in 1994 and now has 192 parties.¹

In 1997, delegates at COP 3 in Kyoto, Japan, agreed to a Protocol to the UNFCCC that commits industrialized countries and countries in transition to achieve GHG emission targets. These countries, known as Annex I parties, agreed to reduce their overall global emissions by an average of 5.2% below 1990 levels between 2008-2012 (the first Kyoto commitment period), with specific targets varying from country to country. Canada's Kyoto target is a 6% reduction in GHGs below 1990 levels by 2012. The Kyoto Protocol entered into force on 16 February 2005 and now has 183 parties, 37 of which have binding emission targets.²

Negotiations for Kyoto's second commitment period (2013-2017) began at MOP 1 in Montreal in 2005. However, it wasn't until MOP 3 in 2007 in Bali, Indonesia where the parties agreed on a two-year process, or "Bali roadmap" and "Bali action plan" which charts the course for a negotiating process designed to tackle climate change on a global scale, with the aim of completing this by COP 15 in 2009 in Copenhagen, Denmark.³

The Poznań meetings (COP 14/MOP 4)

The negotiations in Poznań marked the halfway point in an ongoing series of meetings leading to Copenhagen in December 2009, which is the deadline for concluding negotiations under the Bali roadmap. Two main issues discussed at the conference included the need for post-2012 GHG targets and enabling an "Adaptation Fund" to help developing countries adapt to droughts and floods attributed to climate change.

As for targets, the conference agreed that the world has to cut emissions to avoid the worst effects of climate change; however, little progress was made on how exactly to do

this. The UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has warned that global emissions must start to fall within the next 15 years and then be halved by 2050 if the world wants to prevent irreversible and possibly catastrophic climate change.⁴ Although the European Union has already committed to a 20% target by 2020 (and is prepared to undertake a 30% target if a global agreement can be reached), no consensus was reached at the conference as to what target should be imposed, and on whom, starting in 2012.

As for the Adaptation Fund, controversies centered on where to get the money for the estimated \$1 billion fund. It was suggested that billions of dollars could be raised by placing a levy on existing carbon markets, but this was largely rejected by developed countries who argued it was too soon to decide on financing mechanisms when it is not known how the carbon markets will work on a global scale and how much money is needed for adaptation. While a 2% levy on carbon credits issued under the Clean Development Mechanism, which would provide \$60 to \$80 million for the fund, was approved, no agreement was reached on levies from other Kyoto mechanisms.

Canada's role in COP 14/MOP 4

Canada attracted criticism at the conference, and ranked second last out of the 57 largest GHG emitters in its performance in fighting climate change, ahead of only Saudi Arabia.⁵ While Kyoto requires Canada to achieve a 6% reduction from 1990 levels by 2012, our federal government has rejected this target, seeking instead to reduce emissions by 20% from 2006 levels by 2020. Canada was also given the dubious honour of being unofficially named the most obstructive country among 190 participating nations attending the conference, winning a total of 10 "Colossal Fossil" awards. The Fossil awards are selected and presented by the Climate Action Network, a group that includes more than 400 non-governmental organizations.⁶

Next steps

COP/MOP is set to meet again in Bonn, Germany in the early part of 2009 when the first version of the text to be agreed on in Copenhagen will be debated. Ultimately a decision must be made in Copenhagen in 2009 as the Kyoto Protocol runs out in 2012 and it will likely take the world two years to ratify any agreement.

Conclusions

All in all, Poznań has left much work for 2009. The lack of progress in Poznań may be partly attributed to parties waiting to see what the new U.S. administration will do with respect to climate change. Many are hopeful that President Barack Obama will usher in a new era of pro-climate change policy in the U.S. Of course, concerns over a worldwide recession did not help, as countries are currently concerned about how much the cost of curbing GHGs will impact their economies. With Kyoto's expiry date looming, time is running out for the world to reach a global consensus on how to deal with climate change within the current UNFCCC regime.

¹ See generally online: United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change <<http://unfccc.int/>>.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Limiting average global warming to 2°C above the pre-industrial level will require by 2050 a cut in GHG emissions of more than 50% of current levels; see UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), *Climate Change 2007: Mitigation. Contribution of Working Group III to the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), online: IPCC <<http://www.ipcc.ch/ipccreports/ar4-wg3.htm>> at Table 6.

⁵ Jan Burck, Christopher Bals & Simone Ackerman, *Climate Change Performance Index Results 2009* (Germany: Germanwatch & Climate Action Network Europe, 2008) online: Germanwatch <<http://www.germanwatch.org/klima/ccpi09.pdf>>.

⁶ Online: Fossil of the Day<<http://www.fossil-of-the-day.org/>>.

Comments on this article may be sent to the editor at elc@elc.ab.ca.