

G8: India Stonewalls Demand for Emission Cuts

by Praful Bidwai
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NEW DELHI, Jun 7 (IPS) - India is likely to cut a sorry figure on climate change issues during and after the G8 summit at Heiligendamm in Germany.

As the world's fifth largest emitter of greenhouse gases (GHG) and one of its fastest growing economies, India will come under intense pressure both from the European Union and the United States to cut its emissions. But India will doggedly refuse to make any time-bound commitment to reducing them, and strongly resist legally binding caps.

At press briefings on the eve of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to Germany --ironically, on World Environment Day -- senior officials made it clear that New Delhi sticks to its stand that it is the developed world which caused climate change through its industrial activities; the onus to reverse the damage lies on the developed countries.

Singh said: "Due care must be taken not to allow growth and development prospects in the developing world to be undermined or constrained." Singh emphasised the "principle of common but differentiated responsibility and respective capabilities between the developed and developing world".

This is shorthand for demanding that the industrialised countries cough up the bulk of the costs for reversing climate change.

Singh added: "...more and not less development is the best way for developing countries to address themselves to the issue of preserving the environment and protecting the climate."

This means India will demand special concessions for the developing countries like patent-free technology transfer in respect of "clean energy", and financial assistance, including venture capital funding, to make a transition towards reduced greenhouse gas emissions.

"With such a stonewalling and negative approach, India won't emerge from the G-8 meeting smelling of roses," says Himanshu Thakkar, South Asia coordinator of Dams, Rivers and People, which looks closely at climate change issues and which recently highlighted the contribution of India's large dams to releases of methane, a potent greenhouse gas.

Adds Thakkar: "This will seriously compromise India's claim to any kind of global leadership. But evidently, the Indian government is not particularly bothered about its international credibility. Like the Chinese, it too adopts a parochial and narrowly nationalist position on climate change."

China has joined India in rejecting mandatory caps on greenhouse emissions or cuts in them. There is one difference,

though. China has at least prepared a 62-page comprehensive national strategy document on climate change, including a plan to improve energy efficiency. Chinese officials say they won't accept "any quantified emissions reduction targets, but that does not mean we will not assume responsibilities in responding to climate change."

China has pledged to improve, before the end of this decade, its energy efficiency by 20 percent over its 2005 level. It has also committed itself to raising the proportion of renewable energy in its total energy consumption to 10 percent by 2010.

India has set no such (voluntary) targets. All it will do is reiterate the stand that mandatory emission caps would be unfair to the developing countries, which are still trying to fight poverty and modernise their economies.

China and India together are set to surpass the U.S. as the world's biggest emitters of greenhouse gases in two years' time.

The Indian government's strategy to avert pressure to cut emissions is essentially to hide behind the country's poor people, 60 percent of whom live on less than \$2 a day. It repeats ad nauseam that India's per capita emissions are low, about a quarter of the world average.

However, these per capita emissions are rising rapidly. India's total greenhouse emissions too have been increasing almost four times faster than the world average. They are expected to rise two-and-a-half times by 2030.

Citing low per capita emissions does not make sound sense because India is a highly stratified society.

The bulk of the recent rise in India's emissions comes from the increasingly profligate and luxurious lifestyles of its rich and middle classes and their skyrocketing consumption of private vehicles, energy and water, as well as air-conditioners, washing machines, microwave ovens, and plasma and liquid crystal display television sets.

"Indian policy-makers are victims of a double fallacy", says Thakkar. "First, they wrongly assume that development must inevitably mean higher consumption of resources and hence emissions, when it need not. And secondly, they believe that more development (in reality, higher GDP growth) is the sole key to reducing poverty. This assumes that 'trickle-down' will work. That has proved an illusion."

India officials parrot the view that "India is not a significant contributor to greenhouse gas emissions and nor will it be so in the foreseeable future." But India is already the fifth largest greenhouse gas emitter and is close to overtaking the number 3 and 4, Japan and Russia.

India, many environmentalists believe, will eventually agree to emission caps, but only for a price.

"The price will be greater carbon trading quotas which can be sold at a high profit by Indian companies to polluting corporations from the industrialised countries under the Clean Development Mechanism agreed under the Kyoto Protocol", says Soumitra Ghosh, a West Bengal-based activist of the Northeastern Society for the Preservation of Nature, and a member of the Durban Coalition for Climate Justice, an international activist network.

Ghosh said India's position was dubious. "It is lobbying for the inclusion of hazardous technologies like nuclear power into the CDM. More important, it wants to promote plantations on India's forest lands, which can then be brought into the ambit of carbon trading. This will mean selling India's forests to Western corporations which will thus avoid reducing their own emissions by buying largely fictitious carbon credits."

For all its lip service to promoting renewable energy and clean technologies, India's real emphasis in energy generation is on extracting and burning fossil fuels. Their contribution to electricity generation is now as high as 70 percent.

As a result, India's carbon emissions per dollar of GDP are three times higher than those of the U.S.

And yet, many influential Indian commentators are calling for a U.S.-sponsored "Marshall Plan II", no less, which will finance the developing countries' transition towards cleaner, less polluting technologies.

"But we have seen from the experience of the Montreal Protocol on ozone-depleting substances that such funds are cornered by corporates and nothing trickles down to the larger society," says Ghosh.

The evolving Indian approach to the issue of climate change is best revealed by the government's latest move, to constitute a high-powered advisory group called the Prime Minister's Council on Climate Change.

The Council has 22 members, 14 of them ministers and officials, most of them opposed to greenhouse emission caps. Of the non-official members, only one is a known environmentalist. The others comprise a business magnate, former bureaucrats and journalists with no particular distinction in reporting on or analysing environmental issues.