

Setting the Stage for the UN Climate Change Conference in Poznan, Poland

Fr. Sean McDonagh, SSC, December 1, 2008, Poznan, Poland

At the end of the UN Climate Change conference in December 2007, the UNFCCC Executive Secretary Yvo de Boer said that: "This is a real breakthrough, a real opportunity for the international community to successfully fight climate change." At that time, I wrote that I believed that Secretary Yvo de Boer was overly optimistic, as little of substance was achieved at Bali.

In fact, many people including myself left Bali in December 2007, both disheartened and disillusioned about what had been achieved there. We were also quite angry at the tactics used by the U. S. delegation to block any real progress in the negotiation despite the fact that the 4th Assessment Report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) had reported during 2007, that the scientists were 90% sure that the current increase in global temperature was caused primarily by human behavior. The IPCC estimated that without serious emission reduction policies, global temperatures would rise by between 1.6 to 6.9 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels by 2100. To put this increase in perspective, the last time such temperatures were recorded on Earth was three million years ago.

Despite the clarity of the IPCC report and pleas from their European allies, the U.S. delegation flatly rejected the idea of setting even provisional targets for reductions in greenhouse gases. And they refused to give what the rest of the world wanted most: an unambiguous commitment to reducing America's own emissions. Without that, there was little hope that other large emitters, including Brazil, China, India, Korea and South Africa, would be willing to address and reduce their greenhouse gas emissions. While growth rates in carbon emissions have increased dramatically during the past decade in countries such as China, Europe and the United States of America alone account for more than half the carbon dioxide emissions since the beginning of industrialization 200 years ago.

On the positive side, the delegates agreed to negotiate a new and more comprehensive global treaty to replace the Kyoto Protocol by 2009. The Kyoto Protocol expires in 2012 and it only requires Annex 1 countries to reduce greenhouse gas production. Annex 1 countries include members of the OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) plus countries with economies in transition such as the Russian Federation and countries in Central and Eastern Europe. From the United States, the delegates got a promise to participate in the forthcoming negotiations.

The delegates at Bali also pledged to address deforestation, especially in tropical rainforests. Deforestation currently accounts for one-fifth of the world's carbon dioxide emissions. And they also received vague assurances from China and other emerging powers that they would seek "measurable, reportable and verifiable" emissions cuts.

For many people the biggest change during 2008 in the climate change discussion took place on November 4th 2008. The people of the United States overwhelmingly rejected

the policies of President George W. Bush when they elected Barack Obama. Unfortunately, at Poznan, the U.S. delegation will reflect President Bush's views rather than those of President-elect Obama. President-Elect Obama sent a message to the delegates from around the world who have gathered in Poznan "Now is the time to confront this challenge once and for all. Delay is no longer an option. Denial is no longer an acceptable response. The stakes are too high. The consequences [are] too serious."