

THE UN'S ROLE IN COMBATING CLIMATE CHANGE

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SOME FACTS ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE

- The earth is warming faster than at any time in the last 10,000 years.
- The heatwave during the summer of 2003 (Europe's hottest in 500 years) caused 28,000 premature deaths across the continent.
- The area of the world affected by drought doubled between 1970 and 2000.
- Current climate trends could leave over 3 billion people in the Middle East, Africa and South Asia facing acute water shortages, leading to political instability.
- Drought is an important factor in the crisis in Darfur, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is exacerbated by disputes over access to fresh water.
- By 2050, 30 million more people may be malnourished due to climate change.
- By 2100, 100 million more people may be at risk of flooding in low-lying countries, such as Bangladesh, as well as major cities, such as London and Rome.

Climate change is not only an 'environmental' problem: a stable climate is a prerequisite for political, economic and social stability. If the international community is to avert the disaster of climate change, the discourse around this issue needs to shift to recognise that climate change is in fact a matter of human security.

THE UN'S ROLE IN COMBATING CLIMATE CHANGE

The UN has a central role to play in tackling climate change, both by providing an institutional framework for international cooperation and by galvanising political will behind finding and implementing solutions.

The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) was created in 1992 to prevent "dangerous" anthropogenic interference with the climate system. The Convention was envisaged as a work-in-progress – a loose structure to be modified as necessary. Thus, only one year after the UNFCCC came into force, discussions began to strengthen the existing treaty. The Kyoto Protocol – which, though linked to the UNFCCC, in fact stands on its own – was adopted unanimously in 1997 and entered into force in February 2005 following the ratification of Russia.

The Kyoto Protocol imposes mandatory, time-bound targets for reducing greenhouse gas emissions, but only upon the rich countries which signed up. It does not prescribe targets for developing countries, in recognition of the fact that emissions have originated disproportionately in industrialised countries.

AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE FOR THE INTERNATIONAL CLIMATE REGIME

The Kyoto Protocol names 2012 as the target date by which the richest of its signatories should have significantly reduced their emissions. The Protocol also specifies that negotiations need to be undertaken well in advance of 2012 so that a follow-on target regime can be agreed and established in time. In November 2006, governments meet in Nairobi, Kenya to discuss the future of the international climate regime: their principal task will be to find enough common ground to begin setting up a long-term regulatory framework for reducing global emissions.

In 2001 the US, the world's leading greenhouse gas emitter, announced that it would not ratify the Kyoto Protocol on the basis that curbing emissions would jeopardise its economy and that exempting

developing countries from the Kyoto targets was unfair. A formidable challenge for negotiators of a 'Kyoto II' will be to secure stronger contributions from both the principal developing country emitters and parties such as the US, and other countries like Australia, which have thus far been reluctant to commit to mandatory greenhouse gas cuts.

Another challenge for the government representatives meeting in Nairobi will be to identify ways of adapting to climate change. While the precise future effects of climate change remain as yet unknown, it is clear that some climate change is inevitable and indeed ongoing; there are also indications that the likely impact has in fact been underestimated. The consequences will affect developed and less-developed countries alike, but the poor will be hit the hardest – people in low-income countries are four times more likely to die in natural disasters than people in high-income countries.

To keep the average global temperature increase under 2°C – the threshold beyond which scientists believe that the effects of climate change will be devastating – global greenhouse gas emissions must peak and be falling irreversibly by 2015. The obstacle to achieving this goal is political: governments continue to forego the necessary measures in favour of short-sighted considerations, electoral, economic or otherwise. This approach is not tenable and should be abandoned – difficult decisions and effective action need to be taken now, both at the United Nations and by individual countries such as the UK.

THE UK'S CONTRIBUTION

Under the Kyoto Protocol the UK has committed itself to reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 12.5% of 1990 levels by 2012. It is on track to fulfil this pledge, and has shown leadership in the international community on climate change, most notably in the G8. However, there is cause for concern:

- The UK, with 1% of the world's population, produces 2.5% of the world's carbon dioxide (CO₂), the greenhouse gas most responsible for global warming.
- Despite government pledges to cut CO₂ emissions by 20% by 2010, and then by 60% by 2050, the UK's CO₂ emissions are currently rising.
- Under the government's climate change strategy the CO₂ emissions target for 2010 will be missed, and industrial CO₂ emissions will be higher than they are today.
- No commitments have been made to reduce CO₂ emissions from road or air transport, despite the fact that the former accounts for 25% of CO₂ emissions, and the latter constitutes the UK's fastest growing source of CO₂ emissions.

Environmental campaigners and the two main opposition parties are calling for the introduction of legislation imposing binding cuts on the UK's CO₂ emissions and establishing an independent carbon audit office to monitor the government's progress towards reducing emissions.

ASK YOUR MP:

- Will the government commit to introducing a climate change bill setting binding and regular targets for reducing the UK's carbon dioxide emissions? Will such a bill include provision for independent monitoring of the government's progress?
- Has s/he signed EDM 178, calling for annual cuts in the UK's CO₂ emissions of 3%, with progress to be monitored by an annual carbon budget?
- How is the government – through the Department for International Development and other relevant departments of state – helping poor countries to adapt to the effects of natural disasters, which are made worse by the impact of climate change?
- How is the government working to reduce the UK's industrial carbon dioxide emissions?
- How will the government reduce the impact on the environment of emissions from road and air transport?
- How will the government seek to build a more inclusive longer-term regulatory framework for cutting global greenhouse gas emissions when the Kyoto Protocol's targets expire, one which not only brings on board previously recalcitrant parties such as the US, Canada and Australia, but also secures the participation of growing emitters like China, Brazil and India?