

Heat's on in Copenhagen

YOLANDI GROENEWALD | JOHANNESBURG, SOUTH AFRICA - Dec 11 2009 07:41

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The negotiating rooms in Copenhagen were thick with suspicion after the so-called Danish text was leaked this week. Poor countries eyed their affluent cousins warily about what they viewed as a proposed deal that left them out in the cold -- again.

Going in to the second make-or-break week, when ministers and heads of states will arrive in the Danish capital, the rift between rich and poor seemed greater than ever.

Especially livid about the text was the G77 + China, a negotiating block of 132 developing countries.

Sudanese lead negotiator and chairperson of the group Lumumba Di-Aping called the text disrespectful.

“It robs developing countries of their just and equitable and fair share of the atmospheric space. It tries to treat rich and poor countries as equal,” he said.

Environmental NGOs such as Oxfam and Greenpeace have also dismissed the text as undermining the United Nations process.

As a result of the outrage, the text will probably die a fast death and never be spoken of again. A Danish delegate told the *M&G* that while the text left a bitter taste in the mouth, the debate lacked substance.

It all started out so promisingly, with delegates referring to a “magical atmosphere that could produce an ambitious deal”.

South Africa’s star rose from the outset when the presidency announced it would voluntarily commit to reducing its carbon emissions to 34% below current levels by 2020 and 42% by 2025. Up to then, getting any commitments from rich countries to pledge similarly ambitious caps had been as painful as pulling teeth -- the European Union would go only as high as 30% -- and it was hoped South Africa’s gesture would inspire rich nations to bring better targets to the table.

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But South Africa’s announcement had conditions: the developing world was willing to meet its obligations, but only if rich nations provided the necessary funding and aid to help it curb its greenhouse gasses. The uncomfortable shuffling of feet in the negotiating room was audible.

Then, on Wednesday, President Jacob Zuma -- who until last week was reluctant even to attend the negotiations -- blew his top. He

said the commitments rich nations were putting on the table were simply not good enough and were jeopardising the future of the African continent, which will be the one most affected by climate change.

While he welcomed financial commitments made by some rich countries, Zuma said these remained extremely limited and did not come close to the scale required, which is at least \$100-billion a year for mitigation and \$100-billion a year for adaptation -- ensuring that developing countries adapt to climate change by assisting with practical methods such as dyke-building in Bangladesh or changing farming practices in droughts.

Hugh Cole, adviser for Oxfam in Southern Africa, says South Africa has always played the role of “bridge builder” among the diverse developing countries that make up the G77 + China group and in reaching out to the more progressive developed countries.

Denials, denials, denials

British Prime Minister Gordon Brown compared climate denialists to “flat-earth sceptics” this week and mainstream scientists scoff at their beliefs, write *Karabo Keepile and Yolandi Groenewald*.

But denialists have new wind after hackers revealed a series of leaked emails from scientists at a British university days before the Copenhagen conference, showing that they discussed ways to keep climate science as damning as possible.

Negotiators and scientists at the talks insist that Climategate is a “non-troversy”, but denialists in South Africa believe the emails are just another sign that mainstream science has got it wrong.

They are not deterred by the fact that peer reviewed scientific magazines have failed to publish any of their theories and they

dismiss the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports as biased science. Research has also revealed strong links between oil companies and denialists in the US.

In South Africa, where climate change is not a rallying point during elections, denialists have had little impact on policy. Yet denialists such as Andrew Kenny and Kelvin Kemm are regular columnists for *Engineering News* and *Business Day* and have their own followers.

Kenny believes Copenhagen is an expensive farce. "No country should even consider trying to reduce carbon dioxide emissions, for the simple reason that carbon dioxide has never been shown to have any important effect on the climate," he told the *Mail & Guardian*.

He says the only consequence of rising carbon dioxide levels is that most green plants will grow better, including forests and crops, and "trying to reduce carbon dioxide emissions will be to damage economies, especially of poor countries".

Professor Philip Lloyd, a senior researcher at the Energy Institute of the Cape Peninsula University of Technology, is a sceptic who does not deny that changes are taking place. But: "Right now the developing countries have far more important things to worry about, like people dying from malaria and HIV/Aids, or starving."

Lloyd admits that "most of what he says about climate change "is my interpretation of the status. I differ from the IPCC's interpretation of basically the same facts."

Guy Midgley, South African National Biodiversity Institute chief director and a scientist specialising in climate change, says denialists, unlike sceptics, regurgitate disproved "facts" and repeat

them ad nauseam.

They confuse the public by “cherry picking examples which appear to show positive impacts of climate change, or a lack of change ... bombard scientists with requests for information and produce pseudo--science that seems plausible.”

Earthlife Africa Energy policy officer Tristen Taylor says denialists are flat-out dangerous. “Derailing Copenhagen would be rational if you were 100% convinced that the world’s scientists had got it all wrong.” But what if the denialists are wrong and the world had listened them? The result “would be almost unimaginable pain, suffering and death. Imagine Bangladesh under two metres of water.”

The charismatic dealmakers

Alf Wills

If you’re going to get into a street fight like the international climate negotiations, you’d want South Africa’s deputy director general in the environment department in your corner, write *Yolandi Groenewald and Faranaaz Parker*. With his towering height, devilish ponytail and tough negotiating skills, Wills commands great respect in the African bloc and G77. His portfolio covers international cooperation and resources.

Jonathan Pershing

The United States’s deputy special envoy for climate change is a smooth talker and a shrewd negotiator. Pershing weighs every word and steadfastly refuses to give in to anything the US Senate may not agree to. He was a lead author on the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s (IPCC) *Fourth Assessment Report*, a climate handbook for governments.

Connie Hedegaard

Denmark's stylish climate minister is pushing hard to keep stalled negotiations alive. Hedegaard, the driving force behind Denmark's alternative energy success, is tipped as a European Commissioner for Climate.

Yvo de Boer

The public face of Copenhagen, De Boer is executive secretary of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. The ultimate diplomat, he finds the positive in even the most negative turns in the negotiations and steadfastly refers to the IPCC's recommended 40% emissions cut as a "guiding light" for negotiators.

Lumumba Di-Aping

The suave Sudanese chief negotiator for the G77 + China bloc made waves this week when he lashed rich countries for trying to subvert the negotiation process. Di-Aping, who at one point, was driven to tears of frustration, said that in his country it is "better to stand and cry than to walk away".

Do we care

On the eve of President Jacob Zuma's departure to attend the United Nations Climate Change conference in Copenhagen the ANC's climate change fundi and former environment minister, Valli Moosa, insisted on the ruling party's longstanding commitment to addressing climate change and said ordinary South Africans are more to blame than government for not getting heated about global warming, writes *Mandy Rossouw*.

"When we discussed the climate-change resolutions at [the 2007 ANC conference] in Polokwane, it was discussed in full plenary and not in small groups, as in the case of other policy issues," said Moosa, who is chairperson of the ANC's task team on climate change.

But government has been slow on the uptake.

Despite a worldwide tendency to appoint climate-change ministers, Zuma delegated this function to Water Affairs and Environment Minister Buyelwa Sonjica, who is not a political heavyweight and does not even serve on the ANC's chief decision-making body, the national executive committee.

In the ruling party's election manifesto climate change serves only as a driver for "green jobs".

Zuma was initially hesitant about attending the Copenhagen summit and decided to go only after pressure from the French and Danish presidents, who hope to capitalise on South Africa's reputation as a bridge builder between developed and developing countries.

That climate change is not an issue foremost in most South African minds is a product, says Moosa, of media neglect. "It is a chicken-and-egg situation. If the media wrote about climate change in an accessible way, there would be more public interest."